33

WOLF-LURE

BY

AGNES AND EGERTON CASTLE

Cast.

CASSELL AND COMPANY, LTD
London, New York, Toronto and Melbourne

By the same Authors

Count Raven

The Wind's Will

The Hope of the House

The Secret Orchard

GOVT. GIRLS COLLEGE
SRINAGAR
ACC. NO 1597
LIBRARY

First published 1917

C 6164

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
1.	THE WOLF IN THE BROWN HOUR	1
2.	DIANA OF THE HILLS	11
3.	THE LAST OF THE RUFFELEUS	21
4.	THE GUEST OF CHANCE	35
5.	DAYS OF CASTEL-ROZAC	52
6.	THE WOLF-MASTER OF OLD—AND THE NEW	73
7.	ROADSIDE INTRODUCTIONS	87
8.	A COMRADESHIP IN ST. HUBERT	104
9.	THE PATRIARCH OF LANGÉVOL	119
10.	BERTRAND, THE WHITE WOLF	130
11.	A DIPLOMATIC RETREAT	143
12.	SOME PUPPETS OF THE PAST	160
13.	CONCERNING ONE FABIEN MONTBARS	172
14.	THE VEILED PORTRAIT	189
15.	PORTENTS AND FOREBODINGS	203
16.	THE CAVES OF LANGÉVOL	222
17.	THE WRAITH, AND THE HEIR	242
18.	MEETING AND PARTING	257
19.	NIGHT IN THE WASTE	275
20.	A VAGRANT AND HIS PAPERS	286
21.	THE MANTLE OF MONTBARS	299
22.	THE RETURN OF THE HEIR	311
23.	EUTHANASIA	321
	EPILOGUE	331

WOLF-LURE

CHAPTER I

THE WOLF IN THE BROWN HOUR

IT has often struck me that such pictures as we recall of scenes set in the far-off days of youth are like views from the "big end" (as the phrase goes) "of the spy-glass." They reappear sharp and brilliantly coloured in spite of the fantastic distance; uninteresting details—things that matter no more—sink into nothingness, but all the main features, the strong impressions, surge clear as close reality. And they have that in them, over the mere appeal to the eye, which awakens all our other senses: they come suddenly steeped in scents, however long forgotten; we are conscious of a warmth or a freshness vanished; the music, or the terror, of sounds long ago melted in abysmal space is again in our ears. . . . Strange, indeed, is the clearness with which they can rise through the fog of lapsed years!

Yet, why call it strange? The joy, the pain of yesterday; the pride, the anger, the fear, or the pity of the latest occurrence, are in themselves but recollection, and not more present than the farthest-flung memory.

Such a living picture is suddenly evoked before me by I know not what—perhaps by that whiff of wood-smoke from my fire. Nothing but logs ever burned on French hearths, in those days. . . . Memory leaps back to the green and sunny time when, at four-and-twenty, I thought myself a mature man. Ah, the good time! Once more I live through those autumn months of 1815 which hold the most romantic pages of my lengthening book of remembrance.

Under what head can I gather my first impressions of the strange company I fell in with, in that year of long ago? Perhaps The Wolf in the Brown Hour would serve as well as any. It gives at least the colour. And now let the vanished past become again the passing show of the present.

I am slowly coming out of a profound sleep. I unclose my eyes, rather surprised to find myself in the open. . . . I gaze up with delighted wonder into a blue sky flecked with vague plumes of cloud. A breeze fans my face with freshness and passes on, lightly sighing among tree-tops somewhere behind me. It has been one of those deep dreamless slumbers such as we rarely know in after-life. And, for a while, I cannot remember where I am. And I gaze on, marking with vague interest the slow planing of a wide-winged brigand, a hawk, no doubt, or a kite, that is circling overhead, high in the blue. . . . Then it comes back to me. I am lying on the margin of the small wood of stone pines, with their flesh-coloured boles and their parasol heads of blue green—where the short crisp grass of the chalk country had invited me to sleep through the hotter hours, after the long ramble of the day. I am five hundred miles from my native shores; in the very core of France; in the wildest highland of those central provinces that once, for centuries, were appanages of our English crown; in fact, I am in that wonderful Guyenne of old, which I have undertaken to explore.

I know that, when I rise and gaze about me from the height of my limestone bluff, my eyes will sweep over the greens and whites and pale russets of the land which in its English days was known as the Rouergue country; that, in the mountains on the northern horizon, twenty leagues away, are the dead volcanoes of Auvergne; that, at much the same distance to my right, the view is closed by the high country of Gévaudan, the Cevennes, *the haunt of wolves;* that, a score of miles or so in a pale wilderness sloping on its way to the far Atlantic, begins the Querci . . . and I think it quaint that it

should be the country from which some ancestor of mine—possibly in the train of the Black Prince's bands—derived (so the family tradition runs) his name of de Quercy. . . . I know in fine what will be the glorious immense panorama which presently will again fill my vision. But I linger a few moments more to luxuriate in the perfect comfort of the cooling air. Then, with a yawn that ends oddly in a laugh of sheer physical delight, I sit up. And what meets my gaze is: not the distant view, but a sight of distinctly closer interest. . . .

An echo of my laugh, but singularly more harmonious, made me quickly look to my left—there to find two pairs of eyes fixed upon me.

The first pair, with a smiling, mocking expression, belonged to a young woman seated on a trunk of a fallen tree; the second, watchful and hostile, to a huge dog round whose neck both her arms were clasped in restraint.

As I gazed from one to the other, speechless, lost in my surprise, the silvery laugh ceased and the hound gave a low growl.

"Peace, Brisco!" said the lady tightening her hold. Then: "Fear nothing," she explained; "he would not touch you unless I set him on, or unless you were to show aggression. Lie down, Brisco!"

The beast stretched himself at her feet, extending his muzzle upon enormous paws, but still keeping inscrutable yellow orbs on me.

"And by this token, sir," she went on, "I assume you must be a stranger to the country, not to know that it is tempting Providence to do what you have been doing."

"But—doing what, madame?" I said, finding my tongue at last.

At the sound of my words there passed over her face a slight look of surprise. My French was correct and fluent enough, but it could never be expected that my accent should pass unnoticed. There was a

perceptible pause, during which she eyed me with a new scrutiny. Then:

"Madame? No, I do not claim that honour, yet," she corrected.

"Ah, mademoiselle, pardon——"

"I meant," she interrupted, "that, in these wild parts of ours a sleeping man, alone, at the corner of a wood, runs a fair chance of waking with only just time to realize that he is being strangled by a wolf." She paused a moment, as though to mark the effect of her words. Then: "You must have been, indeed, but a very little while here not to have heard as much," she added.

"The devil!—No, I had not heard so much. The diligence dropped me at Rodez only last night. And, until I reach Millac, where I have forwarded my valise by the carrier, I am to-day voyaging on foot."

"Millac?" she said after another pause. Again she looked at me searchingly. "On foot?—What an odd idea! Why Millac?—But if you meant to reach Millac to-day it would have been wiser not to waste in sleep these hours of daylight."

"But, mademoiselle," I said, still intent on the novel idea she had raised, "if it is so dangerous, as you say, for a man to roam alone on these hills of yours, what about the imprudence of a young lady? We seem to be miles away from any habitation."

"Ah! A young lady! I no longer strike you, then, as one who should be addressed as 'Madame.'" She put this, I thought, rather irrelevantly. "Subdue your wonder, sir," she went on with a tinge of mockery, "I am safe enough. Have I not master Brisco here—eh, my old *Touton?*" The dog raised his head, wagged his long snake-like tail once, then resumed his watchful regard of me. "And, besides, I am not without another faithful companion." With a push of her foot—a shapely foot clad in a high-reaching deerskin cothurne—she brought into better view the brown stock, silver-mounted, of a double-barrelled carbine that reposed by her side on the grass. "With these two friends," she said, slowly

and deliberately, looking very straight into my eyes, "I need never fear to meet the wolf, even in the gloaming. . . . Ha, M. the Englishman, truly it is wonderful how well you are acquainted with our French language!"

I had smiled at the pertness of those words, which in the vernacular are apt to carry a double meaning. "To meet with the wolf in the brown hour," in the gloaming—*rencontrer le loup à la brune*—is an old-world sly way of referring to another kind of encounter which might have results, for a lonely maid, pleasant or terrifying, according to her temper.

And on this there seemed to be established between us two perfect strangers an easier state of relation, as we sat, facing each other, I on the grass and she on her tree-stump.

Gravity, however, had returned to her face. She was looking past me, pensively. And thus I, without discourtesy, had a few moments to examine her. She struck me as much younger than on her first apparition against the bright skies, when I had perceived, so to speak, nothing but a dark outline out of which shone brilliant eyes. It was a girl in her earliest twenties; not ideally beautiful, perhaps, but of the most vivid countenance; of sunburnt complexion, very clear and smooth under the heavy loops of chestnut hair—she had cast off the broad-winged felt hat, which was lying at her feet. The lips had a taking curve and the red of health; her laugh of a moment ago had given a flash of very white teeth.

This young woman's dress, of the simple woollen stuff the peasant folk weave in Gascony, dove-grey from head to foot, bore certainly no trace of the latest short-waisted mode of 1815. But, in spite of its loose tunic, wide-open at the neck, drawn in by a plain leather belt round a slender waist; in spite of its easy wide-swinging skirt (something on the short side, after a rustic fashion) it bore an unmistakable stamp of aristocratic elegance. With every second of contemplation the discovery of attractive feminine points became clearer and awakened a certain ruefulness of young man's vanity. It is a fact

—though for no very clear reason—that no one likes the idea of having been seen asleep.

"May I ask," said I, "how long I have lain there, unconscious, under your sight? Was it not taking an unfair advantage to allow me to go on sleeping—heavens, I hope not snoring!—when you could——"

"Not so unfair an advantage," she interrupted, rather dryly, "as that which might have well been taken by any vagrant wolf—four-footed, as I suggested, or mere biped. For let me tell you, the latter kind is also not rare in our happy province, these days. But your sleep seemed so well justified by your dusty feet; it was so splendidly profound (no, you were not snoring: be re-assured) that I merely watched over it. My time has little value. In fact, the great problem for me, buried out here, is daily how to dispose of it. Hence this roaming of mine which has brought me into your interesting company." Then, with a change of tone: "You have, sir, a cheerful style of waking. I, myself, never sleep in the day; but I wish I had it in my fate, these days, to be able, once, to wake up of a morning upon a laugh!"

"My word, mademoiselle, I cannot tell why I awoke so gaily. The delight, perhaps, of remembering I was in this part of the world . . . and of finding it so beautiful."

"Ah! You take, then, an especial interest in our poor wild country?" she asked, slowly.

"Oh, very special, for——" I stopped, struck by the return of that searching look.

"I am in luck," she pursued, as though to urge me on. "I, who spend the weary days in wishing myself anywhere but in these solitudes, may perhaps be going to hear something to their advantage."

She had risen and was putting on her hat again. I jumped to my feet; and, immediately the dog came to reconnoitre me, sniffing about my legs in a somewhat disconcerting manner. The sniffs seemed to say, as plain as spoken words: "Ah, hum! As for you, my friend, you had better mind what you are about. . . . I

am here, you know." She called him back and patted his formidable head. The monster wagged his tail slowly, and thereafter affected not to take any further notice of me.

"Now," she said, "that you and my faithful Brisco are, so to speak, introduced to each other, might we not as well perform the same ceremony ourselves? Do you mind?" Then, although, to be sure, there was no necessity for forcing an acquiescence from me, she went on as if to give me the lead: "I, sir, am Adrienne de ——" Here she checked herself as upon a wiser counsel—I certainly caught the patrician *de*, though she had hastily swallowed it. "Sir," she began afresh, "many are the people who, having met me, thus by hill and dale, have had to be satisfied with such a pretty by-name as *La Louvecelle*. And so, sir, my name is *La Louvecelle*—your servant." She laughingly sketched a country dip. "And I reside," she added, making a wide gesture, "well, I reside . . . in the vicinity."

I made what I flattered myself was a bow of courtly style. (In those days, such a bow implied what was called "a leg," and a round gesture of the arm towards the region of the heart.)

"And in me, mademoiselle, you behold Charles de Quercy . . . whose residence, for the moment, is the roadside inn. As vague a place," I added, with meaning, "as the vicinity you allude to."

She took no notice of my attempt at archness, but quickly caught me up.

"De Querci? This is never an English name! Do you pay me back with a nickname also?"

"Oh, Charles is English enough, and so is de Quercy, if you pronounce them in another way."

"Querci," she repeated. "You will admit that is singular. The name of our neighbouring province—at least so it was called before they invented their revolutionary departments. . . . How came you with a French name?"

"English enough, by this time, I must again assure you. We have many such; though Quercy is not, I

admit, as common as some others, like Burgoyne or Gascoigne, or Maine, Berry or Lorraine. Now that you speak of it, I do not know of another Quercy family; which is perhaps a distinction!"

"Do many English people, when they happen to have a name—a name, what shall I say?—which connects them thus with France, inherit a fluency in French such as is so admirably noticeable in you?"

There was now a light mocking tone in the girl; and the thought struck me that she believed I was playing a part, and saw through it.

"It is actually two days," I answered merrily, "since I have had to exhibit my papers. The ceremony is overdue! I will indeed show them to you with greater pleasure than to the last gendarmes, who could not be convinced that there was nothing criminally suspicious about a gentleman travelling on foot—one who had no better reason to give than that he was studying the country. Here is my passport.—Ah, no, that is only my arms licence.—Though I never thought it necessary to provide myself with a double carbine like the young ladies of this country, I am not without my faithful pair of Mantons. Here is the thing. Behold my credentials, signed and sealed, it may be noted, by our great minister, my Lord Castlereagh himself, duly viewed and countersigned at our Embassy in Paris—and even endorsed by M. Fouché, your Minister of Police. You see I am well vouched for!"

I expected that she would have waved it back, but she unfolded the crisp sheet and read it from end to end. In those days a passport was a vastly more elaborate affair than at present. The document recited my position as of Bentham-Redhall in the county of Suffolk, and of Lincoln's Inn, London; it requested the protection and help, within the kingdom of France, of all the powers that were, in the furtherance of my literary and historical research as well as for my private safety. When she came to the end, she returned the paper with a musing air.

"As for my French," I resumed, going back to her

question, "it needs hardly excite your surprise. My mother was French. There were a good many French marriages in England at the time of the great emigration. I learned it, so to speak, at her knee. And now you know as much, indeed more, about me than the best constituted authorities," I concluded, carefully replacing the sheet in the safety of my inner pocket.

It will be seen that, within this brief space of time, the dusty English wayfarer and the maiden errant were already on a footing of familiar banter.

"I am sure," she said, shaking off her reflective mood, "you will understand my curiosity: a feminine weakness, as men are fond of saying. In these lonely provincial places, you know, time hangs heavy on one's soul. A newcomer, if he is one of our own class, why, it is almost in itself an adventure! I assure you your presence in the countryside will be held a great event!"

She picked up the carbine and, with practised though obviously unconscious smartness, tucked it under her arm; shook, by one quick shrug, back over her shoulders the mantle that hung by a strap from her neck, and whistled for her dog.

We were standing on the edge of the bluff; outlined against the mellowing western sky, the grace of her figure and carriage struck me again—and with a new admiration. She was singularly unlike what one would expect to find a young lady of French aristocratic birth, but all the more fascinating for that.

"Are you going to leave me, now, to my fate?" I asked, without attempting to hide the regret in my tone.

She pointed, with a turn of her eyes, to the sinking sun, and answered with her flashing smile:

"Mr. de Quercy—since that is your English name—your passport claims for you all the help you may require in France. The only help I can afford you is advice. In little more than an hour it will be dark, and the moon only rises after midnight. Even if you could be shown the way—and I do not envy the fate of the

foot-traveller in our deserts—you could not reach Millac under three hours' hard tramping. Therefore, sir, take my advice. Get back to the road below yonder. Walk on towards the sunset, which, you perceive, promises to be gorgeous—and in a little more than a league you will come to the village of Rozac. Please do not interrupt, but penetrate yourself with my counsel. There is a little inn there: at the sign of the *Golden Rose*—though it does not matter, really, since it is the only inn hereabouts. It is particularly rough; but there is, as I say, no choice—and it ought to do for a traveller with a knapsack for luggage. You can have some fresh trout for supper. And you, who sleep so heartily on the grass, will no doubt put up with a mattress of bracken. Then, to-morrow you can pursue your way to Millac—and your interesting research. Historical, was it not?"

"But," I pleaded, "can I not escort you—and is it good-bye?"

She laughed again.

"I hardly see what else it can be but good-bye. As for escort, why, it would be more like my escorting you—after watching over your slumbers! An attention, sir, which, by the way, I must charge you to forget. There is not so much to talk about in this cheerful country of ours, but that such a story could fail to go the round . . . and, for that matter, be well improved upon. And so, sir—on your honour, you have never met with—with La Louvecelle. There is your road. I myself prefer the cross country. So, good-bye it is—and may your research in our Querci prosper!"

Upon this she gave me a little detached nod and moved away through the wood.

CHAPTER II

DIANA OF THE HILLS

DISCONCERTED by the closing of our intercourse, as abrupt and as completely outside any management of mine as its opening had been; and, truth to say, strangely disconsolate in the renewed silence, I stood for some moments pensive, after the last swing of grey skirt had disappeared behind the rosy boles. There was small use in telling myself that she was perfectly justified in leaving the stranger as simply as she had encountered him; that it would certainly not do for her to return to her "domicile," wherever that was, in company with a chance young man. I felt now distinctly lonely. And there was a multitude of things I would have liked to find out about this fascinating, if rather too masterful nymph. . . . Yes, fascinating was the word in my thoughts, for all her cavalier treatment of me.

The breeze was growing chill that I had found so balmy a few moments before; and I thought (it comes back to me) that she would have passed like the breeze, delighting and, behold, gone! to warm and stir for a brief moment, then glide on.

Then the preciseness of her directions as to my next movements—given as though there must be no doubt about my obeying them—came back to me, with an odd sense of expectation. Must they not portend, though I could not logically argue why, that we would yet meet again and in circumstances conventionally more admissible? A new and alluring perspective! Undoubtedly (what a prismatic thing is the easy enthusiasm of the spring years of life!) a fresh interest had accrued to this wild unknown country.

With bounding gait, I ran down the sides of my bluff—all through the scent which the aromatic rock-plants yield in the cooling airs of eve—and rejoined the white winding road.

Gaily—for my sleep in the breeze had mightily restored me, and my spirits were tuned up to a new eagerness by this piquant encounter—I tackled the stony way. Twirling my stick airily, feeling never a concern for the weight of my pack, which earlier on the road had at times been distinctly irksome, I marched, so to speak, in rhythm with the lively lilt of my thoughts —thoughts mysteriously gilded like the vast outlook of the country at this sunset hour; vaguely filled with unfamiliar perfumes like the air of these uplands.

Thus I covered the first league, pursuing an imaginary intercourse with La Louvecelle. . . . Tantalizing name—what could it mean? The nearest guess at it was the young she-wolf: which sounded absurd. Well, be it what it might, it was alluring, and somehow seemed to fit her strange personality; Amazon, Walkyrie—no, rather Diana, for it was instinct with patrician refinement. Diana of the Hills. . . . Here was one with whom no man would dare to presume, and yet who would easily prove a comrade. . . . "Witty to talk with, pretty to walk with"—the old worn phrase, which of a surety had never been meant for one of the Louvecelle's mettle, oddly enough, came back to my mind. And, as the white miles, now drawing to grey, dropped behind me, I built idyll upon idyll—so runs the imagination in the blessed salad days of life—all very lovely and impossible, ever melting into something new, but always round the same principal figures: Charles de Quercy and Mademoiselle de . . . who chose to be known only as La Louvecelle

Presently I felt as certain as that I was then tramping the roads of old Guyenne, that we should meet again; and soon, though she had seemed to dismiss me as a thing that was done with. . . . No, I would not now make forward for Millac on the morrow, as she had indifferently pretended would be my better course. I

would so far follow her advice as to take my night quarters at Rozac; but I would start my exploring, not from Millac, but in this very vicinity . . . wherein, as she had said, was her residence.

And there must be Rozac itself, yonder ragged cluster of grey houses, little more than a mile lower down ahead!

In all the schemes of young romance, luck is an ally ever confidently reckoned on. Yet, I was scarce prepared to find hazard play his part, as for a while I had reason to imagine, so early in my favour.

The sunset had, as she had forecast, been truly gorgeous. It was followed by a luminous, mysteriously entrancing afterglow. The way, just then, was sunk deep against the flank of an abrupt hill. All about me, in the hollows of the land, brown dusk was already holding sway. The shades of coming night, in spite of the common saying, rise, and do not fall on the earth: they had not yet reached the higher ground. The crest of the hill, running almost straight ahead, parallel with the road, towards some bronze-hued wooded heights, was sharply defined. I was vaguely wondering at the beauty of the contrast, when suddenly, half a furlong ahead, cut out in black, against the amber clearness of the sky, a figure appeared which it was impossible not to recognize instantly. At that distance it seemed scarce larger than a bird, but the rapid free gait, the swing of the skirts accentuated by the rising wind of sundown, were not to be mistaken. The cross-country path chosen by the Louvecelle had brought her well ahead of me . . . and she was obviously making for Rozac . . . where she had enjoined me to halt this evening!

Within me there was a leap of joy. How lucky it had been that I myself should have covered my road at such a round pace . . . how easily—by one minute's lagging—I would have missed this crossing of our paths!

It makes me smile, indulgently, to think, across the chasm of all these years, of the overweening conclusions of four-and-twenty eagerness!

I lengthened and hurried my stride to overtake her, if possible, before she should diverge from the road, up on that higher way of hers which the steepness of the escarpment made it impossible for me then to reach. When I had more than halved the distance between us, as though to justify my conceited belief that she desired another meeting, she stopped in her rapid stride. For a moment I thought she had noticed my approach. But it was not so: she had her back to me. She stood quite still; and now I could distinguish by her side her four-footed guardian—likewise motionless, in the unmistakable, rigidly square attitude of the hound at gaze upon a possible enemy.

A few seconds later there came upon the wind overhead a sound the like of which I had never heard, repeated four times at rhythmic intervals. It was a weird, full-mouthed cry that one might describe as half-bark, half-bay, but that there was in it a musical sonority—indeed a beautiful note—difficult to associate with any savage beast. And yet, no doubt because of the many allusions to wolves that day, my mind jumped blindly to the thought. I broke into a run.

Upon the last of the ululations, I could see the girl make a strong urging gesture, upon which the hound gave a leap and disappeared from sight. As I drew up, nearly abreast of her position above me, I marked a favourable place upon the rocky face of the crag, and breathlessly began the escalade, praying in my soul that I might yet be in time to render knightly aid to the wandering damozel. But in the uncertain light the scramble was no easy matter, especially to one trammelled with wayfarer's pack; and it took more time than had seemed likely. At last I reached a certain clump of dwarf-laurel overhanging the edge and was hauling myself up; cautiously, for my footing on a narrow, crumbling ledge was insecure and the bush itself was none too sturdy; when the ring of my Amazon's voice, brought to me clear and distinct by the rush of the breeze beating straight into my face, made me suddenly pause. It was raised—by no means in alarm: rather

in friendly, almost eager tones—as if to greet one that was still some distance away.

"*Loup-Cervier!* The Loup-Cervier himself! Welcome *à la brune*, Loup-Cervier!"

Then, a man's tones, rich, sonorous and gay—a young man's voice:

"Louvecelle! At last! After so many months, Louvecelle! Down, Brisco!" And, between the words, the soft thud of hoofs approaching on the grass.

Cold dismay fell upon me. In one moment the mantle of chivalry had been wrenched from my shoulders, leaving me, as I felt with a kind of horror, in the pitiful garb of a mere eavesdropper. And my only thought was to withdraw, shamed in spite of all my innocence; to withdraw in haste and, if it pleased the powers, unseen. But it was not to be done. My footing, just then, suddenly gave way; and, for bare life and indeed for fear of instant discovery, I had to drag myself higher up. There, happily under cover of the bush, I lay flat on my chest, with my legs still overhanging the chasm.

It was a remarkable good fortune that the wind should be rushing down against me as it was; for it swept away with it the noise of the falling stones and the rustle of my passage under the laurel branches—and, what was even more fortunate, kept from the nose of the terrible hound all suspicion of my presence.

Thus—although (thanks be!) it was only for a few minutes—was I forced to play the revolting part of spy on the affairs of a pair of secret lovers. Not a word of theirs could be missed: they were barely ten paces away; and scarce a look—unless I had deliberately shut my eyes, which in truth it never occurred to me to do—for, up on this height the afterglow, if already mysterious, was still sufficient to illumine the two young faces.

It revealed a man of athletic, slender figure; in gentlemanlike, almost dandified attire—white buckskins, top-boots, and grey riding-coat. He had just dismounted. His horse's reins looped over his elbow, he stood smiling, two paces away from the girl, keeping at

arm's length the friendly advances of the dog. He held his hat in his hand; and his black hair, crisp and low-growing, cut as the fashion was then *en coup de vent*, gave to his olive, aquiline face, clean-shaven, a romantic air.

She ungloved her right hand and extended it. And he, stepping nearer, took it with (I had to admit it, for all my resentment) a grandly gallant manner, bent and kissed it on the wrist.

For a moment they stood smiling into each other's eyes. Then conventionally, almost shyly, he began:

"You had, I take it, my note of last week? It is a blessed chance that I should be able to explain! My messenger——"

"Ah yes, your messenger!" she interrupted with a laugh. "What of that messenger of yours? Do you know, my dear Loup-Cervier, that I might very well, not an hour ago, have betrayed myself, and you, to a perfect stranger!"

He drew himself up with a start, and I could see a heavy frown gather. The human Loup-Cervier can look a threatening customer, obviously, when crossed, as well as his brute namesake.

"Oh," she mocked him, "no harm done! I tried this person with a few wolfish spells—and you should have seen the poor youth's bewilderment. The quarry is of a different species, as it turns out!"

"Quarry?" cried the man, with a note of sharpness.

"Merely an Englishman."

"An Englishman?"

"Does that displease your worship? A quite harmless Englishman. His purpose here, archæological—that is the word, I believe? A craving to study the country of some lost ancestor—or so I understood."

There seemed to me that there was a curious intention in her manner of speaking these words which both puzzled and excited me. But every green fool is apt to attach an importance to his own name on the lips of a lovely girl. Her companion was satisfied with the apparent indifference with which she cast me off: and he smoothed his tempestuous brow.

"Louvecelle, Louvecelle!" he exclaimed, still doubtfully, but with returning smiles at her, "in the old days——"

"Yes, yes," she interrupted, "in the fine old days, the good, fighting, conspiring days, it might have had . . . consequences!" She laughed. "But now, alas! such a slip matters little or nothing. Even if he did blab of Louvecelles—but, I warrant him for a gentleman, he will not. And so we may dismiss him. But, again, what of this messenger of yours, Loup-Cervier?"

"The fool met with some accident. But what matters it, since I have found you unaided? Yet I might have been too late, not knowing the country, but for the speed of my mount. I scour the highways and byways. I skirt the woods and the crests. I halt upon the peak. Ah! in the distance a moving form, faint grey, like a wreath of mist! My heart sings out to me: Louvecelle, at last!"

There was a rising passion in his voice. But he controlled it back to the tones of respectful camaraderie:

"Then," he went on, "I could not resist sending you the old rally cry. And when Brisco—I could see you throwing him out—brought me your permission, I drew near."

She shook her head:

"And, by this same token, for seasoned partisan fighters like the Louvecelle and the Loup-Cervier, are we not behaving like the veriest conscripts, thus out in the open? There are no sharpshooters as in the old days—but, in full view of the high-road—on the sky line! There may be sharp eyes to spy, and there are certainly sharp tongues to wag. But, *baste*," she went on, "it is almost past the brown hour now; and *entre chien et loup*, one is safe enough!"

She laughed at the conceit. For the saying, "'twixt dog and wolf," in her vernacular, expresses that state of dusk in which the eye has no exact discrimination.

"And so, comrade, you may escort me as far as the edge of yonder woods—but no further. Now, what are

your plans—for you have some plans, I assume? As for me, since I came to live with my guardian here, time has stood still. Guardian no longer, by the way. I have come of age since we last met, my friend! I shall be an old woman soon." Her light laugh rang. "But," she resumed, "if no longer guardian, still my kind and much loved relative. Yes, I love that dear, sad old cousin. I would not pain him for the world—but the life here, oh, the life!——"

I heard no more. She had taken his arm. And between the hound, gravely resuming his attendance, on the one side, and the led horse on the other, the couple moved away. Their voices sank into indistinctness, their linked figures faded into the brown shadow.

For a good while longer I remained in my undignified—one may say my somewhat perilous—position, until it should be safe to drag myself out of concealment. At last I stood again, a man erect upon his feet, if much sobered of imagination and rather crestfallen in spirit.

I understood all now. What the Loup-Cervier and the Louvecelle might be (or rather might have been, for it seemed their date was out) I did not know then. But it was easy to scent there one of those royalist associations which from time to time had burst into armed rebellion during the "tyranny of the Corsican"—as it had been the fashion to describe the late Imperial reign. In such fraternities, women—especially women of high birth—often played more than a merely inspiriting part. I could see, in my mind's eye, Mademoiselle de . . . whatever be her name, wielding the carbine to good purpose in one or the other of the anti-Bonapartist risings in the south and the west of France—expeditions, which though romantically heroic, had always proved so futile during the Hundred Days of 1815.

Yes, I thought I could reconstruct the outline of a love-story, thwarted by separation, but like to come to blossoming now, which a freak of fate had brought secretly within my ken.

None too soon, indeed—or so I tried to reason, as I saw the air castles I had been so guilelessly building melt into shapelessness like clouds in a sudden shift of the wind—for I had been in a fair way to embark, from the very start in my voyage of learned research, upon a fatuous love-chase that could only have ended in mockery—aye, and perhaps gnashing of teeth.

My thoughts, as I stood there, irresolute, in the breezy solitude, like the poet's "*clear brown dusk, nor dark nor day*," were indeed *enveined with shade!* . . . "And so we may dismiss him," she had said.

A pretty, idyllic passage, up on this hill crest, gilded but a moment ago! Yes, in truth it had been that . . . but one in which I certainly played no part! . . . Well, dreams, of their nature, are meant to leave us, on waking, where we were before. And I was awake, if rather ruefully so; and I stood, a mere belated traveller, on my way to a lodging for the night and a much-needed meal after a long day's fast.

So I heaved a sigh—a sigh of farewell to the secret young wolves—and found, at some further risk of breaking neck or limb, a way down to the guiding road once more.

Yonder, in the cup of the valley, lights were faintly twinkling. One, brighter than the rest, was, I somehow felt sure, the beacon of the *Golden Rose* inn. And at the sight, though I could not have told why—"such a hare is madness the youth!"—my spirits leaped again, over that cold decree: *And so we may dismiss him;* leaped to God knows what fantastic expectation of adventures that might await me there.

> The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day;
> Now spurs the lated traveller apace
> To gain the timely inn . . .

These lines of "First Murderer's," flitting through my head as I covered the last furlong or two of my road to Rozac, seemed quaintly to fit the time and place. The orange bands of the September afterglow

were fast waning, low down on the right. Night was settling upon a scene as wild and barren as any upland upon which Banquo may have ridden at the fall of his last day. Ahead was the wayside inn. And I was, if not spurring, at least hastening as lustily as the fatigue of some twenty miles of stony way—and a somewhat brown state of mind—would admit. My leaping of the spirit had been brief. Yes, little wonder that my frame of mind should again be as brown as the night that was closing upon the land. Romance had flitted by, as I thought, leaving me to dudgeon and weariness. . . . "There is a little inn at Rozac. . . . The sign is the *Golden Rose*. . . . A rough place, but you can have some fresh trout for supper. . . ."

CHAPTER III

THE LAST OF THE RUFFELEUS

THREE minutes later I entered Rozac, and cast down my knapsack on the stone bench outside its unique hostelry.

A la Rose d'Or—the sign had a noble enough claim; but, as my informant had warned me, the low-eaved, chalk-built, tumble-down place gave but poor promise of entertainment. Mine host was standing at the door, blocking the way. He eyed me attentively as I explained my requirements.

"The gentleman, I perceive, is a stranger," he remarked; by which word he implied that I was not a countryman of France.

"Yes," I answered a little testily, for he seemed to ignore my inquiry for refreshment, "and one that is very tired and very hungry."

"The fact is," said the man, looking back into the house, and jerking his head as if to beckon to some one from within, "that the rooms—well, you see, we mostly have only such people as carriers, packmen, or shepherds stopping here. A person of your quality—for one can see that with half an eye—will find it pretty bad. But I think I can propose something better. Here is M. Louradour, who will bear me out. It is just a piece of luck that he happened to be calling, for some trout. He has, in fact, bought my last. M. Louradour," he went on, as a round, grey-headed, clean-shaved man, dressed in rather shabby dark-green livery, made his appearance in the doorway, "is maître d'hôtel to M. le Comte—seigneur of this place, as I may inform you."

The new-comer bowed in an exuberant style that delighted me: it was quaint amid such surroundings.

"For centuries," he said, in a rolling Gascon brogue, "for centuries, oh, beyond counting! there has always lived at our Castel-Rozac a Comte de Ruffeleu-Rozac. Ah!" he added, glancing at the innkeeper with a smile of self-importance, "I see the gentleman, stranger even as he be, is not unacquainted with the title. Who could be?"

He addressed the question to the circumambient spaces, as one that requires no reply. I had indeed not been able to repress a start as my antiquarian ear caught once more a name of wolf-like significance—*Leu*, ancient French for *loup*. Ruffeleu, then, was "Hustlewolf," as our mediæval ancestors might have had it.

"The name, no doubt," said I, "is widely known. Though, before this hour, I was not aware that it belonged to these parts. But well?"

"Our castle of Rozac, sir, is a pleasant place to live in. Oh, beautiful! And we would not live anywhere else. The Ruffeleus de Castel-Rozac have always lived on their estates—except in those years of the Revolution, when we passed across to England—to the gentleman's country. A fine country. Rather damp for our taste, but fine. Oh yes!"

In other circumstances I might well have cursed the man's garrulity. But then, Ruffeleu . . . La Louvecelle . . . Might there not be a connection? I lost for the moment all thought of hunger and fatigue, and listened with an attention that obviously flattered him.

"Yes," he was rolling on, "Castel-Rozac is a pleasant place, very pleasant. But, since their revolution, the neighbourhood is not what it was. The Redcaps did not do so much harm to Castel-Rozac itself—though it is impoverished, of course. Oh no, it is not like in the old days! But the other châteaux hereabouts, just heaven! And so, as I say, with so few neighbours, it is a little dull at whiles for M. le Comte."

"The fact is," interrupted the innkeeper, tired perhaps of a recital he had heard often before, "that M. le Comte

has made an arrangement with me, if a voyager of quality should ever light at my door, to invite him to the castle near by. It is not that I refuse to receive the gentleman—but really I would advise him to accept. It would only be a bad joke for me to say that he would be as well treated here as up there—and it will please M. le Comte."

Thereupon, to show that he looked upon the matter as satisfactorily concluded, mine host of the *Golden Rose* gave a smile and a shrug and re-entered his house.

"His honour will permit me," promptly said the rotund major-domo, and seized upon my knapsack. "But one moment, while I get my fish and light my lantern, and I will conduct him. It is a mere ten minutes' walk."

It would have been difficult to demur, even had I felt that way inclined. A little bewildered by the novelty of the whole affair, I submitted to the hospitable kidnapping. And presently I was following my guide out of the silent village across the bridge and up a gentle hillside way; listening to his glowing account of the magnificence (in the old days) of Castel-Rozac. At a turn of the road, on the shoulder of a knoll, the ancient *manoir* appeared in sight, darkly silhouetted with its pointed roofs against the sapphire of a now starry sky. Farther away rose the ruined battlements of a more antique stronghold.

"That was the old place," explained M. Louradour, with a proprietary gesture, "in the days of the English. And it was built over a still older one. Oh no, there is nothing in France more ancient than Castel-Rozac, though the present château only dates from after the Wars of Religion—and that is some good time back!"

We mounted through a succession of stony terraces, where, as far as star and lantern glow could reveal it, some fair attempt at gardening had been made. One or two dim lights showed in the front of the château which, however, vouchsafed no livelier sign of occupation. In the silence there came from within, deep and

menacing, though muffled by the close walls, the bark of a dog—a single note of warning.

"The coach entrance is on the further side," explained the man, as he produced a key and let me in through a small door. "I would not fatigue the gentleman, however, by taking him all the way round to the court of honour."

By the light of the lantern, we ascended a back stair and passed through sundry dark passages, until we reached the living quarters of this rather eerie place. These were illumined, somewhat poorly, by small oil lamps hung against the stone walls. Altogether, for a seignorial mansion, Castel-Rozac had a cold, not to say dismal atmosphere. We had not met a living creature.

At last I was introduced into a room which, to my pleasant surprise, gave tokens of distinct comfort: a fair-sized apartment, tapestry-hung, with a huge curtained bed, sunk, after the ancient French style, in an alcove. Silver candlesticks glinted on a wide dressing-table. A fire was ready laid on the hearth. The room, in fact, bore every appearance of being prepared against the coming of a guest.

The man lighted the six candles; then knelt by the fireplace. Presently the crackling of heather faggots and the leaping of rosy flame among pine-cones and logs introduced a new note of cheerfulness.

"I will now go and inform M. le Comte," said he, rising and making his deep bow, "that a visitor has come. M. le Comte will be greatly pleased to hear it. What name shall I carry to him?"

I produced a card.

"Express my thanks to your master," I said. "As soon as I have put a little order in my attire, I hope I may have the honour of repeating them myself."

I had hardly finished my ablutions, and was still in the midst of such toilet as the gear of my knapsack could allow, when the major-domo re-entered, bearing a tray. There was a suppressed excitement about him. He seemed to measure me with a new curiosity.

"M. le Comte sends his welcome to Mr. de Quercy

at Castel-Rozac, and will be overjoyed to see him whenever the gentleman is ready. Supper will be served at nine o'clock. But, meanwhile, it was thought that some refreshment may be acceptable—a tasse of consommé—a white roll." So saying he displayed the fare on a small table. "His honour will allow me to fill his glass. Wine of Porto. My master thought that Mr. de Quercy, being an Englishman, as appeared from his card, would prefer wine of Porto. M. le Comte has lived in England, as I had the honour of telling you, sir. It appears that the quality, in England, drink nothing else. M. le Comte has a great liking for Englishmen, and is happy to see one at Castel-Rozac."

As he thus bubbled on, the maître d'hôtel kept shooting at me glances of burning curiosity. He helped me with my dressing; knelt to impart, with a red pocket-handkerchief, some kind of polish to my dusty hessians; gave me a final brush—all with that blend of benevolent familiarity and respect which is the stamp of the French servant *de bonne maison*. At last, beaming, with an "If monsieur is ready?" he led me forth.

The passages, I noticed, were now better lighted; and there seemed to be a kind of stirring about the place which had struck me as so dead and alive.

"A visitor for M. le Comte!" cried the major-domo, pompously throwing open the door.

I was ushered into a vast panelled room; a kind of picture-gallery, sparsely but handsomely furnished, bright with many candles. In front of the fire, warming his hands under the high carved stone mantle proudly armoried, stood an old gentleman, tall and thin, of decidedly grand presence, in spite of a white head of hair intractable and bristling. He was dressed in black close-fitting kerseymeres, a high-collared tail coat with buttons of cut-steel, and a voluminous white stock.

On my entrance he came forward two or three paces, then halted with a nervous jerk, as though a sense of decorum struggled to check too great an eagerness. I was never much troubled by feelings of diffidence; but,

C
GIRLS COLLE
SPRINGFIELD
1597

for once, a certain paralysis of shyness crept over me. The circumstances were, no doubt, strange; and in the wan, wrinkled face of my unknown host the eyes shone with a brightness that was disconcerting. His first words, however, in their grave courtesy, quickly dispelled my awkwardness.

"I have to thank you, sir," he said, "for having accepted an invitation so informal; one which, however, I could not deliver myself. Mr. de Quercy, I understand," he went on, "an English traveller in our land."

He extended his hand, which I found ice-cold.

"The thanks, sir, must be on my side," I replied, "for hospitality so unforeseen and, I need hardly say, so pleasantly acceptable."

"By no means, I assure you. The advantage is all mine. I am a lonely man, sir. I have been lonely these many—ah, these many years! Never more so than since my return here to the dwelling of my ancestors; and in the decline of life, the loneliness weighs on me. Therefore," said the seigneur, looking into my eyes with a gaze I can only describe as devouring, "by consenting to come up here you have done well. But will you not draw near the fire? Our nights are chilly on this rock of Castel-Rozac . . . Old Castel-Rozac!"

Without taking his eyes off me, he again spread his thin hands to the blaze.

"But will you not be seated? You must be tired. My servant tells me you travel on foot. Is that really so?"

"Yes," I answered, taking an armchair in compliance with his gesture. "The best way, I think, to explore a country-side. The walking tour is an English form of enjoyment. Unknown, I find, in France," I added with a smile, "to judge by the number of times I have been stopped and severely questioned by the gentlemen in the white-galooned cocked hats!"

He did not seem to heed the latter remark, but took up my first words.

"Explore? And this country-side? You take, sir, an interest in our country-side?" he said. Then, as if

conscious of some breach of courtesy, which, in truth, had not struck me: "You must forgive me, Mr.—Mr. de Quercy," he went on, glancing at my card, which, I noticed, he still held between two fingers. "It is inhospitable, unseemly almost, to question a guest about his goings and purposes. But you can have no idea how it excites my interest to find any one coming to these out-of-the-way parts of ours—this place where all I revere and love is centred. This out-of-the-way place," he insisted. "Yes, a noble province—but little known, even to our French people. We are far away —so far away from anywhere——" He was groping for words, like one whose principal thought is long ahead of what he says. I could see that he was craving for a boon to his curiosity: a boon which I had no reason in the world to withhold. "And you an Englishman, too!—an Englishman. Very strange."

"Why," I cried, "that is just the point: this High Guyenne of old is chock-full of attractions for the student of English history, and ought to be better known. Full of English associations. One may speak of them now without rancour, after so many centuries. The story of that part of the Hundred-Years War dealing with the Black Prince and the Free Companies is a special study of mine."

The Comte, who had been staring into the fire, brought back his gaze on me.

"Study. I see—I see. Historical study," he said, and there was a lowering note of disappointment in his voice.

"I am even commissioned for a book. But," I went on lightly, anxious to dispel any impression of pretence, "the best of it all is a pretext for a pleasant holiday—for roaming and investigating just what happens to lure me most."

On this a slight flush came to his cheek.

"Aha, I see, I see. Study? Book? Bah—a pretext for adventure! A pretext for travel—travel with its possibilities—seeking the unknown—the far-off. I thought that must be it, in one so young, so lusty

young! Let me see, Mr.—Mr. de Quercy, you must be——"

"Four-and-twenty," I put in promptly, deprecating an impeachment of nonage.

He gave an eager smile.

"The very thing I was about to observe," he said quickly. "You would be barely four-and-twenty. And so, you come to France—for research." He laughed excitedly. "All the easier for you, who speak our tongue so admirably. Faith, better than I have ever known an Englishman speak! Do you know, but for a slight accent, very slight, one might take you for French! And you are dark, for an Englishman. Black hair. Yes, really black hair. Unusual in England."

"My father was very dark, I was told—for I do not remember him: he died when I was still a child."

Again the odd gleam sprang in his eyes.

"So—I see. You lost your father—when still a child," he said slowly. "A great misfortune—for a son. And he was dark, you say?"

"We have plenty of dark men, I can assure you, though I believe the legend in France is that we are all carroty."

No young Briton relishes being told that he looks like a Frenchman. I could, however, hardly show that I resented the suggestion which, after all, had been wrapped up in a compliment. But I hastened to excuse at least my proficiency in the tongue.

"As for what you are good enough to praise in my French—why, it comes to me by chance rather than by merit of study. I prattled it as a child. My mother——"

"Your mother!" he exclaimed in a suddenly loud voice. "Ah, French! French, of course. . . . Is it not so?"

There came out of the thin, stringy throat a sob that I might have taken for a sound of anguish, but for the extraordinary joyful tenderness that had suddenly overspread the face. Then the old man took a few paces about the room, as if striving to overcome this new,

incomprehensible agitation, and came back to me, murmuring disjointedly:

"Now, this is well—well. My God, this is good!—I mean this is charming—to have you here as a guest, my dear Mr.—Mr. de Quercy. This is good!—de Quercy, too!"

A thought was now beginning to hover through my mind that I had lighted, at the close of my day's march, upon some "eccentric"—as the expression was then; or a case of mania, harmless enough, no doubt. The Comte de Ruffeleu was evidently a gentle lunatic; humoured, it would seem, by the household; humoured even by the neighbourhood, as testified by the innkeeper's ready compliance with the lifting of a legitimate prey from his very door. To retire from the situation, now, was an impossibility. And, besides, there was something so pathetic about the old gentleman's delight at having secured company in his solitude—his dreadful solitude, as he had sighed—that I forthwith attuned myself to the mood.

"Sir," I said at last (and, this time, with a bow frankly French in formality), "what is truly good is your kindness, your wonderful hospitality, to a perfect stranger. An unforeseen benefit to one who, like myself, is so keen to know things of this country—to know them from within, I may say. I appear, by good fortune, to have struck from the first at its very heart."

"At the heart! My dear lad!" cried the Comte. He made a gesture as if opening his arms, but restrained himself. "Pray forgive this familiarity, my dear young sir, I am an old man—you cannot be offended. Yes, yes, you are right, at the very heart! Is not the ancient blood of Ruffeleu—Ruffeleu of Castel-Rozac—blood of the deep heart of France? You do not know it yet. You must. You shall know it. Yes—to-morrow you shall see in the ruins of our chapel—up yonder in the older castle laid waste by the English after so many sieges—you shall see the tombs of Enguerrand de Ruffeleu . . . he fought at Bouvines under the eyes of Philippe-Auguste. Of Enguerrand II.

—he followed Saint Louis on the last crusade . . . Of Gontran IV. de Ruffeleu—he struck at the Spaniard, side by side with Bayard, at Garigliano. Ah—and of many others that have made French history. But, even now—here—in this room—you can behold some of those who have made great the name of Ruffeleu—the name I stand here to bear, alone and old, and like—save by God's mercy—to be the last to bear it!"

He had taken up one of the heavy candelabra from a table; and, lifting it above his head with a strength one would hardly have expected in his worn frame, beckoned me, somewhat imperiously, to come nearer the row of portraits that lined the long walls.

"Anne-Henri de Ruffeleu," he began solemnly, throwing the light on the presentment of what in England we would have thought an Elizabethan gallant, in starchy ruff and peascod cuirass, "who fell for the religion at Moncontour.—And here is Gontran de Castel-Rozac, whose counsels Richelieu so wisely followed at the forcing of the Pas-de-Suze. . . . Through his wife came to us the blood of Rohan and Ventadour.—Another Gontran, Maréchal-de-camp, crossed the Rhine with Turenne. With his children begin our links with la Rochefoucault and Polignac.—This one—Louis-Anne"—he was pointing to the portrait of a vapidly handsome man in the powder, ruffles, and embroidery of Louis XV. times—"was killed by the same roundshot that carried away Marshal Berwick at Philipsbourg. His wife"—the candelabrum was now in front of a languishing beauty in the rouge and powder and close white curls of Pompadour modes—"was Gizelle de Vivonne, who grafted on our antique stock the ducal branch of Mortemart. . . ."

Thus the old man passed from frame to frame, unconscious of the weight he carried aloft, flinging on me looks of exultation which, at each recital, shone more fiercely. But for the correctness of the nomenclature (all these are well-known names, and great, in the nobiliary of ancient France), it might well have passed for the excited, meaningless outpourings of insanity.

He stopped suddenly: the two folds of a door at the further end of the room were thrown open, and the major-domo's voice purred in richly with the announcement:

"M. le Comte's supper is served."

Almost immediately, in the silence that had fallen upon the room, there came a rustling of silk, punctuated by the scratching footfalls of a dog upon the parquet floor. And presently, holding her monstrous hound by the collar—even as I had first beheld her a few hours before—in walked, with light sandalled foot, dressed in an evening gown of shimmering satin, the free-moving Diana of the Hills who had made herself known as La Louvecelle!

Strange to admit—although I had felt so certain I should meet her again—she had vanished from my mind amid the novel experiences of the evening.

She gave no sign of astonishment, or of recognition. But I could not repress a smile of pleasure on beholding her in a new kind of beauty. I looked round quickly at my host, anxious lest he should have marked this. I could see that it had not escaped him. Yet, instead of surprise and inquiry, I found an answering smile on his face.

He was still holding his heavy burden, and quaintly went on in the same tone:

"And this is Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu-Fézensac, a young cousin, of the cadet branch—an orphan; and also the last of her race! In her veins runs blue the blood of Montesquiou, of la Roche-Guyon, and many more of whom you may know hereafter." Then, with a change of voice, breathless, like one whose heart is beginning to beat fast: "Adrienne!" he exclaimed. "Adrienne, my child—at last! Yet sooner than I had dared to hope!"

"Cousin Gontran! . . ." she cried, taking a step forward, frightened, it was plain to see, by his exaltation. And indeed now his eyes were those of the demented.

He waved her aside, and signing to me with a

gesture passionately imploring, drew me to the end of the room where, over a grey marble console, hung what I recognized as a portrait of himself, although it was that of a young man in the dress of the last century.

"And here, sir—you who bear this strange, this impossible name of Quercy, you see the last known, the last recognized Ruffeleu of Castel-Rozac—the last, or so some one, in her fury of resentment, would have had it, of this long and noble line, without one *mésalliance* ever since France has been France—the last of the Lords of Castel-Rozac, a man who, until this day, lived in the torture of thinking he might die without transmitting his name to a legitimate heir. It is a noble name, as you now know; a noble one to wear, aye, and to transmit, if it were to fall, as a mantle covering all else, upon your shoulders!"

His voice was raucous. At the last words he placed the candelabrum upon the console. I then noticed, close to his own portrait, which was hung a little to one side, the dark purple folds of a curtain, shrouding another picture.

He paused panting, triumph on his countenance, to draw from his breast pocket a letter which he placed upon the marble.

"This you will see presently," he said. "Meanwhile, look!"

And, his head still turned towards me, as if fearful to miss by one scintilla the effect he was intent on producing, he drew back the curtain, with a measured movement.

The portrait revealed under the light of the three candles was certainly one which, in any circumstances, would have drawn a visitor's attention sooner than the conventional presentments of the gallery. It was that of a young woman, handsome, but above all striking, both as to features and expression: a face which once seen never could be forgotten. A small head, framed in raven-black hair; unpowdered, for its attire was in the allegorical style so much affected by Hoppner; straight

eyebrows, dense and dark, meeting, Judith-like, over most brilliant eyes that looked straight out, fierce and yet mocking. A small mouth of rich curve and colour, yet—the thought struck me at once—almost cruel in what seemed a suppressed smile. It was a living beauty; but a beauty that repelled rather than appealed.

I bent towards it with a new attention, wondering vaguely how an English canvas came into this place, forgetful of what I had heard of the count's exile. There was a dead stillness in the room. One might have heard a pin drop. It was as if the very breath of those about me was being held. I had a consciousness of the tense, expectant gaze fixed upon me from all sides. I straightened myself and looked round. The old man's eyes, in his white face, had a widening in them as of gathering fear. The girl's russet orbs were dark with some inexplicable anxiety. The major-domo, waiting at the door, had his grey eyebrows bent towards me. Even the dog himself kept me under his yellow stare—a stare of menace! Silence and scrutiny were intolerable. I tried to break the spell.

"A very fine picture. Whose portrait——" I began, but stopped short. A groan like that of one in nightmare escaped from my host. He was breathlessly fingering his stock.

"Boy, boy!" he gasped, "when did you last see your mother?"

"My mother!" I exclaimed, as, in a flash, something of the fantastic misconception stood revealed. "My mother, sir? Why, she was fair and blue-eyed—and she died nearly ten years ago!"

What followed comes back to me, across the years of half a century, like a patch of delirium. The old man's jaw dropped; he gave a howl that had nothing human: King Lear, over the dead body of Cordelia!

"Again!—again! I shall never know!—I shall die without knowing!—Cursed woman! Ah, no—*misère*, *misère*, it is I who am still the cursed of God! Her vengeance to the end—to the end!"

His hands were outspread over his head. He glared at me with bloodshot eyes, his face was growing purple, I distinctly saw his hair rise in a curious inhuman way.

"What makes this boy here?" he roared. "Back, back!"

He was falling. I made a rush to save him—a snarl rent my ears. A huge living mass leaped at me from somewhere; tearing fangs gripped me, red hot, by the neck and dragged me down. My head crashed on the marble table—and the world became a void.

CHAPTER IV

THE GUEST OF CHANCE

It was two days, as I was told, before I came back to consciousness. I awoke to find myself lying in a strange bed in new and mysterious surroundings. An elderly, portly man with a smiling, quizzical, but benevolent face stood at the foot of the bed, silently watching me. With an effort, for my throat was painful and constricted, I asked:

"What has happened?"

I spoke in English. He answered me in French, divining my question.

"Come, this is well! You have had a little accident; but you will be all right in a few days. You must not talk—nor move—for the present."

The pronounced southern accent brought back everything with a flash. I made a quick effort to sit up; but an intolerable shooting pain through the head, and a burning sensation about the neck, made me sink back with a groan.

"There, my young friend," said the stout gentleman, whom I guessed to be a doctor, walking round as he spoke, and laying a firm hand upon me, "what did I tell you? You will have to remain quiet. Understand? Quiet in body and in mind. You are among friends, and well looked after. In a day or two the headache will go. Concussion, if you know what that means. As for the throat, beware how you disturb your bandages! You must let this worthy woman look after you—and obey, like a good boy. Understood, eh?"

It was then I noticed, standing not far from my pillow, an old woman, wrinkled-faced and white-haired, in the peasant dress of the country, who was contemplating me with a maternal smile.

"Drink this," the doctor went on. "Carefully! Do not move your neck more than you can help."

The admonition was scarce necessary.

"And now," he resumed, after feeling my pulse and again putting a hand on my forehead, "to prevent you from wondering too much, from fidgeting and asking questions, I will just tell you what has happened.—M. le Comte is not in very strong health. While talking with you, the other night, he had a stroke. He fell against you, as I was told. Unfortunately there was another personage present—that fearful beast Brisco, the Irish wolfhound—I always said Brisco would murder some one, sooner or later. He very nearly did it this time! Brisco thought you were at grips with his master, and naturally, seeing the sort of brute he is, he leaped at you. You fell, awkwardly. Result—concussion. That explains the state of your head. Besides, you were very nearly strangled. So much for your throat! And I understand that, only for Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu, who is as brave as any Greek amazon, in another moment you would have been past all mending. And now you understand what is wrong, and why, for a little while more, you must be as still as grub in cocoon. In a fortnight's time you will be up again. And, I hope, M. le Comte also. Was it not bad luck? If Master Brisco had only bled him on the spot, instead of you, you might both have benefited! But, thank God, my two invalids are in a good way. And so, my boy—nothing but patience. You will remain in excellent hands—between Madame Rivarol here," he gave a friendly nod at the old woman, "and our brave Louradour, whom I hear coming in to relieve her watch."

The fortnight which elapsed before I was allowed out of the sick room was filled for me, in spite of Dr.

Roubilliac's warning, with an endless chasing of thoughts which led to no intelligible conclusion.

Extraordinary and tragic as my adventure had been, and irritating as was the sense that I had only as yet been able to gather glimmering of its meaning, it need hardly be said, perhaps, that, through nights of semi-delirium, and the long days when weakness and the pain of my throat made speech difficult, it was the figure of the young huntress of the woods that chiefly haunted me.

The bright indifference of her smile, the piercing gaze she had fixed upon me! . . . Why had she looked at me in this contradictory fashion? True, she told that swaggering young gentleman—Wolf-comrade, how I hated him!—that she had taken me for his messenger until my answers to her questions proved the mistake. But going back again and again upon the tantalizing interview on the high land of the bluff, my memory too certainly assured me of one fact: to the very end, she had continued to search my countenance with marvellous bright eyes; to gaze at me as if she would read into my very soul. And then there had been a tone in her voice, to my ear replete of meaning, even while she repudiated all interest in me. There was only one explanation: she too had taken me for the heir. The heir! The old man's son . . . thus her cousin! And if the mad thought had been true, and I had been a missing hope of Rozac—heavens, what opportunities!—I flattered myself as I lay staring at the shifting shadows cast by the tiny oil-lamp, and hearkened to the worthy Madame Rivarol's snores, that I could have taught my Diana of the Hills to forget Loup-Cervier.

The tawny woodland would rise before me, obliterating the gaunt stateliness of the tapestry-hung guest-room. I would see her, first silhouetted in all her lithe grace against the golden sky, and then seated before me, an exquisite foot, in its high buskin, thrust into my vision. She was as unselfconscious as a boy, in spite of the intensity of her fulvous gaze . . . Alas! I could

take no sop to my vanity on that score, since the poor mad old count had hailed me "Son!"

It fretted me that she had not once been to stand beside my pillow and look down at me, were it but with a single glance of sympathy, or even pity. . . . No conventional prudery withheld her, that was certain, and her guardian was ill. Had she cared; had she had the least fraction of interest in me, she would have come. But now she knew me for what I was; the most unimportant of travellers, the merest trespasser in the wild woods of Rozac. I could, in my loneliness, feel the airy disdain with which she had cast me from her.

Once I woke, crying: "Louvecelle, Louvecelle!" in a kind of anguish. And my aged nurse rose and addressed me in patois with divers soothing endearments and administered a cup of herb-brew, aromatic, but of hideous bitterness, of which she would not spare me a drop. She assured me that I would instantly fall asleep again, and returning to her armchair, forthwith set the example. But I lay awake, my throat hurt me, and my pulses throbbed. And presently there came to me sounds which filled me with terror; a terror, too, that had so poignant a sense of reiteration that without being able to gather my thoughts I felt that it was under it I had started from my sleep, and that it was associated with some dread moment of my life. It was a scratching, subdued, yet angry, against the panels of the door; and snorting breaths of defiance and challenge, driven as it were into the room beneath it. . . . Brisco—"that fearful beast," as the doctor called him—he was striving to get at me. . . . "I always said he would murder some one, sooner or later." Ah! if he broke in upon me now, there would be no doubt about it this time!

Half-delirious as I must have been, I next thought the monster's weight was on my chest. I could not cry out because that strangling agony was at my throat.

Then with a sense of comfort, like the touch of cool water in a raging fever, like the sight of blue sky

between appalling thunder-clouds, I heard a call, silver-clear:

"Brisco!"

And I knew I was safe. A serenity, a balm—it was far other than what water or blue sky could bring; it was a peace of the soul that encompassed me like a mantle. And, wrapped in it, I fell asleep.

Yet the while I slept I dreamt I saw her, high and minute against the sky, far, far above me, with the figure of a man beside her. And in my repose I was sad. No doubt the febrifuge, horrid but wholesome, had its effect.

After that the hound was better watched. I hope I am no coward; but in my helplessness the mere thought of that menace, separated from me only by an inch or two of wood, made my blood run cold. Yet I would have died rather than betray it to a soul.

Now those who know human nature—above all, the human nature of a lad of twenty-four—will not be surprised to learn that I defied the doctor's admonitions, in another quarter, by insidious cross-questionings of my attendants on the subject of the mystery that hung over Castel-Rozac.

The woman, I soon realized, knew nothing likely to guide my surmises. On the other hand, Louradour—the confidential servant—"could an he would" have had much to say. But, in the midst of his attentive ministrations, of his genial solicitude, he showed an amount of reserve concerning his master's affairs which, in one of his southern temperament, was nothing short of heroic.

. . . Yes, M. le Comte had been failing in health, these last years. . . . He was just at the age when, it appears, the *coup-de-sang*, the falling stroke, was to be feared. . . . More was the pity, for M. le Comte was simply the finest gentleman of France.

Here the faithful henchman would seek relief from the pressure of his Latin garrulity by diverging to the subject of the honours of the house. And he would

generally end his varied recitals by a long reverential gaze at the inscription that shone faintly, in faded golden letters, under a painted escutcheon charged with twenty quarterings that surmounted the mantel-shelf.

DIEU VEUILLE MON AME!
MA VIE EST AU ROY,
MON COEUR A MA DAME,
MES HONNEURS A MOY!

Many a time I had spelt it out in its fanciful gothic lettering. The words danced in my brain at nights—indifferently in the old-world French, or in the English version they suggested:

To God my soul I pray!
My troth my king's alone,
My lady's my heart alway,
My honours are mine own!

Each time they brought me back to the conviction that this room, of which I was now so fortuitously the occupant, had really been kept ready against the return of the missing heir—an heir, somehow, mysteriously unknown. And my thoughts would hover round the beauty of that woman of the portrait—no doubt *la dame*, living though estranged, still dwelling in the heart of the old châtelain of Rozac—of the man so likely soon to yield his soul to God without being allowed to transmit those "honours" he set such store by.

But if Louradour kept discreet silence on the haunting tragedy of Castel-Rozac, he indulged with freedom his love of words when talking of Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu, for whom he displayed the liveliest admiration. And during the many hours through which he seemed to consider it his duty to entertain me, I was favoured with a very complete biography of the romantic orphan girl—who, as the count had said, was also the last of her line. It was only six months, it seemed, that she had come to live with M. le Comte, and she was already, every one felt, about the château, their own demoiselle; and with that, all the world knew how

brave she was. There were people, of course, who found fault that she had gone forth to fight like a man, but he, for one, had always the same answer, "What about Joan of Arc?" He would say, "Ah, if our demoiselle has done wrong, what about Joan of Arc?" On more than one occasion, I felt it a kind of duty of discretion to try and check this outpouring of reminiscences. But, by one of Louradour's meridional temperament, all such attempts were easily evaded.

"Your honour will understand that, for one like our demoiselle, the life here is dull—oh, terribly dull! But mademoiselle is afraid of nothing. My faith, she need be afraid of nothing!"

He had just concluded a panegyric in which he had described the brilliancy of the lady's former existence, before she was orphaned and had come to live in this retirement. And he had been eloquent in his account of the glorious excitement of her life during the last insurrection of the West against "the Usurper"—the rising which, as he supposed I knew, would of course have spread and succeeded even if "the bloody Corsican" had not meanwhile been overthrown at Waterloo. (This was news to me, but it mattered little.) What was closely interesting was to hear that mademoiselle had been an officer in the heroic legion of royalist partisans raised by some relatives of the house in Brittany.

"Yes, an officer! La Louvecelle they called her. Yes, they called her that! They had all of them their *nom de guerre.* Mademoiselle can ride, and fire a muskatoon, better than the best. And, as I said, she fears nothing. Think of it, for so fine-bred a demoiselle! But she is a Ruffeleu, and that says all. Ah, they will long remember and speak of the Louvecelle in the west country!"

Here was the explanation of much that had seemed so puzzling. And I began to believe it was by the young châtelaine's instruction that the faithful servant had indulged in these apparently ingenuous confidences.

At any rate, when the time came that we could meet again, she certainly seemed to take it for granted

that I was fully in possession—as the French phrase has it—of "the map of the country."

An armchair had been brought out for me on the upper terrace of the castle, whither I was conducted by the benevolent Madame Rivarol. As I reclined, joying, after my confinement, in the fresh airs of a mellow afternoon and in the wide view of the green and russet country, I noticed that the woman placed another chair close to me.

"His honour," she said, with her old smile, "to-day will have our demoiselle's company instead of mine." And on this announcement she marched off.

No doubt loss of blood, and a bed-ridden existence, had left me in a very weak condition: my heart began to beat faster than was comfortable. I had time, however, to recover some composure before the strange being whom, in my thoughts, I always called the Diana of the Hills made her appearance at the head of the terrace stairs. It came upon me as a pleasant shock to see her just the same as in the first hour of our meeting.

Clad in the woodland grey; her soft leather buskins powdered with the dust of the road; chestnut hair flaming in the sunshine under the wing of her slouch hat; tawny eyes afire in the delicate tan of the face, she had sought me straight from one of those roamings which—she had made me understand—were the solace of her existence. A forest creature she seemed to me, then and always.

However lovely in clinging satin, with ringleted head and sandalled, silk-stockinged, beautiful feet, she was never then to me but as a goddess disguised in the ordinary garb of young ladyhood. The breath of the wild was about her; the whisper and tints of the trees. Despite her still April youth, she carried the warm autumn colourings—hair glorious as the turning beech, eyes ruddy as maple mirrored in a running stream, lips tinted like the fruit of the wild briar! And the quaint impalpable grey of her garment reminded one of the

mists that gather in October, even under the sunshine, among the boles of the trees.

Straight and lissom as the sapling in the wind, with a tread like that of some free stag of the glades, she stepped towards me. No weapon did Diana bear to-day; but, even as at that sunset hour, she held the great hound by the collar.

As she reached the level of the terrace she stopped and waved her hand to me. It was a friendly gesture.

I will not say there was not a flicker of anxiety mixed with my joyful contemplation, as I marked how her doughty companion stood, stiff, square and bristling with threat, his terrible muzzle sniffing his enemy.

With her shapely foot she drew an invisible line on the terrace flags.

"Now, Master Brisco," she said sternly, raising a musical voice, "listen well to me! You lie down here. Lie down!"

The beast looked up at her for a moment; then slowly, heavily, sank upon the ground. Again she drew her toe along the line, and raised her finger solemnly:

"Not a move beyond this, sir!"

He heaved a profound, snorting sigh; sank his head between his paws, and, with yellow eyes fixed upon me, wide, alert, unwinking—I thought of the two barrels of a gun in steady aim—remained absolutely still.

She then advanced, with that light mocking air that had from the first captivated and tantalized me. From her manner we might have parted but a few moments before, and in the most ordinary circumstances.

"Do not attempt to get up, Mr. de Quercy, or I shall have to go back. That is well. And she sat down in front of me:

"I hope, sir," she went on, "you will soon get quite over the effects of this little *contretemps*. You really look very well already—considering!" She was smiling at me. But more gravely she added: "I am glad. For it was all through my fault. I hope really you will not hate me."

"I could certainly never entertain such a feeling," said I, with the laborious politeness of the day, "even if I could believe in the possibility of any fault in you, mademoiselle."

"Nevertheless," she insisted, "it was my fault. Entirely my mistake. If I had not counselled you to stop at the *Golden Rose*——"

"Oh, I see what you mean——"

"No, my dear Mr. de Quercy, you do not see at all. I will explain. And as—though Dr. Roubilliac does allow you a little conversation now—it is better for you to speak as little as possible, you must listen in patience. There is a great deal to explain ; partly on account of my rash interference with your movements in the country, but mainly on account of the still rasher intervention of Master Brisco yonder. Had it not been for him, the only sufferer from my good intentions would have been my poor cousin. You would have departed, in peace and health, on the following day. Instead of which—no, Mr. de Quercy, there is no use in attempting to protest—Castel-Rozac is your prison until Roubilliac signs your release. And this brings me to my first point of business.

"As you are now free from your own room, it becomes very necessary that you should be recognized as a friend, once for all, by our too uncompromising protector. He ought to be abjectly apologetic. But that is not his way. He has no discrimination for shades, my old Brisco. Friend, or enemy : that is all he admits in his old long head. If friend, all is well. If enemy, heaven help you !—as you know.

"So, if you are to be free of the house, there must be no doubt left in him, after his little misconception. It must be made plain—oh, quite plain."

She began to laugh, I could not guess why ; got up, and standing by my side, facing the dog, placed her hand on my shoulder.

"Now, Mr. de Quercy," she said, "I trust I am not going to give a shock to your English sense of propriety—and, for that matter, it is as well for me

that here we cannot be overlooked by French eyes! Necessity demands that Brisco should be absolutely convinced. He sees things in broad lines, my Brisco."

She gave another laugh. It rang close to my ear, in perfectly enchanting music. Then woodland fragrance encompassed me: she bent over me and kissed my forehead. . . . "Diana, Diana!" cried my heart, in the tumult of its pulses. . . . "Diana kissed Endymion—and he woke!" This was an awakening to an unbelieved joy. If the sound of her voice, in the night, had been as water, the touch of her lips, now, was as wine—cool, pure, fresh, and yet intoxicating.

Her voice, uplifted with delicate tremors of laughter, brought me back to this plane again:

"Brisco!—Here, my Toutou!"

The hound, head alert, was watching the development of events with interest. He now slowly rose to his huge height and advanced, waving his tail doubtfully. But all menacing squareness had fallen away from him.

The girl bent lower over my shoulder, took my hand in her ungloved one, and extended it towards the approaching muzzle. Brisco fixed his mistress with his yellow orbs; licked her slender fingers, and then, upon her insistent gesture, condescended to do similar homage to me.

"There!" cried she. "That is done. Brisco is the true *gentilhomme* among his kind. He has given you his parole: he will not break it. Now pat his faithful old head. Peace is signed. I hope, on your side, you will bear no grudge."

Her laughter, her airy indifference, the aloofness of her whole being, at the very moment when she held the hand of the man she had kissed, wrought in me disillusion as swift as it was overwhelming. The glamour had vanished. I had fallen from moonlit impossible heights; and, the dizziness of my descent passing away, I could feel how the chill mists of the valley gathered about me. How little must a girl think of a youth when a kiss can be bestowed in such manner! The

scarlet of humiliation rushed to my forehead. I felt her eyes upon me, and plunged into the first words my pride could suggest: a clumsy attempt to parry ignominy with a compliment.

"Grudge?" I stammered, looking at the hound who was settling down by my chair, "no, indeed! I shall always owe a debt of gratitude to Brisco. Were it not for him, why——"

I broke off, choked at the sound of her pealing mirth. She straightened herself.

"Softly, sir. I know that what you were going to say is sure to be very pretty, and gallantly turned. But remember, the less you talk, the better for you. That, by the way please understand, is Roubilliac's saying, not mine. We have got through this little piece of business very nicely—have we not?—with Brisco the terrible lying down in friendship between us!"

Business! She need not have laid this subtle emphasis on the word. I understood thoroughly the light in which I was to regard the palpitating episode.

"Now"—she went on, sitting down on the chair beside me, and stretching her distracting feet upon the hound's back, "I have to discharge myself of a kind of embassy, and I hope it will be as successful a transaction."

I believe I raised an inquiring eyebrow. She answered it:

"It is from the Comte de Ruffeleu, to his honoured guest, Mr. de Quercy. My cousin, the Comte de Ruffeleu, would have come in person, before this, to tender his apologies for what you have suffered under his roof. But he is not recovering as quickly as we hoped, and Roubilliac—well, you know how overbearing Roubilliac is. My cousin, therefore, has asked me to bring them for him. He feels that you are more than entitled to some explanation of the singular scene of the other night."

She paused; then looking me straight in the eyes, went on gravely:

"No doubt you have made more than one shrewd

guess at what ails this dreary old house of ours. But, having guessed so much, it is better that you should understand all. We know that an English gentleman will not gossip of matters which are of very private interest. The misfortune of this house is guessed at, and not known. The Revolution did my cousin this much good that the rumour of his story was lost in the great clamour. People do talk, of course; but no one knows—no one, at least, beyond a few friends. You have already shown yourself discreet. You did well to be silent to my cousin, on the subject of our meeting, that first night. Then I thought—I am about to tell you what I thought. All that is over, now; but it is well you were silent, or I might be robbed of the little bit of freedom I still have. It is a story that it would take long to tell properly. How shall I make it short enough, and yet make you understand, and yet sufficiently explain the strange mistake of mine that has brought trouble on you—that might, I fear, even have cost you your life? Could you . . . could so young a man, and unmarried, ever understand?"

It was really something of a comedy to hear her, who certainly was not by a couple of years as old as myself, talk in this experienced woman-of-the-world manner. True that, from all I had heard, she seemed to have had a good deal more of life packed in her short existence than most people. I could not repress a sarcastic smile. But she marked none of it. Her eyes fixed on the blue mountainous distance, she was evidently selecting her words, intent on saying no more than the strict necessary.

"Could you conceive," she said at last, "the case of a young woman, after four years of sufficiently happy marriage, suddenly developing such hatred for her husband (on what account of jealousy and insulted pride, it is useless to say), a lust of revenge so ferocious, that from one hour to the other she left his house, carrying with her secretly her infant child—and never, never, mark you, either of them being seen again?"

Her tone was so tragic; the flash of her eye, as she

fixed it on me, so fraught with sorrow and passion that I gasped:

"Not dead? Not self-murdered?"

"No, sir," she retorted sharply. "Furies like her do not choose such commonplace methods of vengeance. She lives, she is living now—to torture. No one has ever been able to discover her whereabouts; but we hear from her—or rather my poor cousin hears from her—with diabolic regularity. Never in life, she tells him, shall he and his heir meet. Never shall his son suspect his origin or his father's name. You have seen my unfortunate cousin. You do not know what an honourable and gallant man he is, but this much at least you already know about him: his pride of race, overpowering all other interests in life, his worship of family honours. With him it is a haunting strain of thought that amounts almost to a madness. Oh, she measured cunningly where to strike! And you know her—at least you know as much as myself—through that portrait. It was painted during the *émigré* days, by one of your great artists, Hoppner, in England, where the son was born.—Ah, this time, you really do see something, I believe. And in a moment you will see all, in so far at least as you are concerned. The irony of Cousin Gontrand's tragedy is that his offence, I have heard, was after all imaginary! He loved his young wife, if not as some women would be loved——"

She paused, her eyes lost themselves for a moment's space, dreaming over the landscape bathed with gold-shot mists. My heart gave a throb. Of what was she thinking? Of whom? Of Loup-Cervier perchance, prowling about the woods yonder. Had they met to-day? Had they kissed? Oh! bitter thought! Whoever it might be that filled her brooding, it was certain that if she kissed him, it would not have been as she kissed me! Her grave voice rang across the angry trouble of my mind.

"Well," she went on, "he loved her faithfully enough at any rate. That's a part of his race creed: his God,

his King and his Lady, and his Honours for himself. Oh! the family *devise*—it must be familiar enough to you by this time—literally portrays the last of the Ruffeleus! As I said, she knew how to torture him. It is hard to conceive anything so demoniac as a spirit of resentment lasting through twenty years; twenty years during which she and the father were growing old and the child advancing to man's estate, still deprived of his birthright. And yet it is so. Every year, wherever the Comte de Ruffeleu may be, towards the beginning of autumn, he receives a letter—we believe mostly from somewhere in England—a letter in which his wife taunts him with the announcement that she is alive and strong; that so is the son. 'A pretty child,' she would say at first. Then: 'A promising lad.' And of late years: 'A very fine young man.'"

Here, Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu, suddenly struck by some private thought, gave a slight laugh. But quickly resuming her grave air:

"So long, of course, as he knew her and his son to be alive, my poor cousin could not look to any other legitimate heir of his blood, or even appoint safely a collateral to succeed him. That is why she keeps him so relentlessly informed. But she also enjoys the thought of worrying his soul with hopes and uncertainties. And this is more than ever shown by the last letter, the one received this year—some three weeks ago."

La Louvecelle opened a fawn leather pouch which, in a kind of mediæval fashion, she always wore hanging at her girdle, and drew a much crumpled sheet.

"You see, Mr. de Quercy," she said, as she flattened it out over her knee, "in making this kind of confidant of you, I do not do things by halves. I will read it to you. It explains my cousin's fond belief—I might even call it his hallucination—on the night of your arrival, that, at last, fortune had relented and brought back his unwitting heir to the home of his race. It will, maybe, also explain something to you of my own rash surmise when chance brought me across your way. Listen:

"'You will be interested, my dear Gontrand, to hear that, from what I have lately found out of your son's movements in the world, he may actually —though naturally quite unaware of the fact himself—be wandering in the country of his magnificent ancestry. Think of it! The little Enguerrand, that was. Now plain Monsieur. . . . But what matters the name? Nothing but a providential interference with ordinary likelihood can ever make you and him meet. I trust this strange move of our little Enguerrand does not portend that he may have scented out something at last, careful though I have been! If it should turn out so—well, I trust you will find in him all that you may desire.'

"That was the letter which my cousin was about to show his son as soon as he should have recognized the face in the portrait. He was so sure, poor man, that you would recognize it; that here was the long-lost one, who had, at last, scented out something! And, truth to say, so had I been myself, when we met so fortuitously on the crags—an Englishman, speaking French almost like a native—bearing what seemed a made-up name—a very fine young man," she laughed again, "mysteriously roaming the Rozac country. You will admit, there was fair cause for mistake! And yet it was only a new form of torment, more cruel than ever. You see it, now, do you not? I myself hastened back, by a short way. I warned Louradour. He at once scampered down to the *Golden Rose*, where you were to stop. Oh yes, I felt convinced you would stop there, as I counselled." She looked at me, with her mocking dimple. And, well, you know the rest."

She got up; waved me back in my chair, as I attempted to rise. All her airy lightness of manner had returned.

"Now," she said, "it only remains for me to be forgiven. You know how, but for my intermeddling, this accident would never have happened. You must forgive

me, though I do not say I am sorry. You have forgiven Brisco, I know. Shake hands—with Brisco, I mean. *Allons, maître Brisco, la patte !*"

Her laugh rang again, as, somewhat grudgingly, the wolfhound, who had arisen even as his mistress, raised his heavy claw in my direction. I shook it with exaggerated cordiality, trying to return the smile of her brilliant eyes.

"Excellent! My embassy concludes with the Comte de Ruffeleu's kindest messages to Mr. de Quercy, and the hope that Mr. de Quercy will consider, without any reservation, Castel-Rozac as his home for as long as he feels inclined to honour it by his presence. I trust," she added, "I have acquitted myself satisfactorily? *Au revoir*, till to-morrow, Mr. de Quercy. Louradour will attend presently."

She swung away with her companion into the house.

Sensation and thought had hold of me; mind and heart were in a pretty whirl. Many-coloured were the memories, bitter-sweet the feelings. And the mischief was, I could not as much as pause and take breath between them. . . . "It only remains for me to be forgiven." . . . "I will not say I am sorry."

Oh! I could forgive her every mocking bit of disdain, every slighting glance, every delicate barb of feminine cruelty, if those words of impenitence meant only what I would so fain believe: "I am not sorry, because we have met."

GOVT. GIRLS COLLEGE
SRINAGAR
ACC. NO
LIBRARY

CHAPTER V

DAYS OF CASTEL-ROZAC

"MONSIEUR LE COMTE has risen, for the first time, at his usual matutinal hour. Monsieur le Comte is, I may say, recovered from his attack."

So spoke Louradour, as, with plump olive hands, he spread the armoried napkin across my chest and drew the little table which bore my breakfast-tray within reach. The coffee steamed fragrantly, the rolls shone golden crisp, and had a delicate savour of their own. I was still invalid enough not to dream of rising before the day had warmed; and I had sufficiently advanced on the road to health to be conscious of a greedy zest for my early meal.

"I am glad," said I rather thickly, my teeth already in a roll, "I am glad that M. de Ruffeleu is better."

"Better? Recovered, I tell you, but for a little more of a tremble here, and a little more of a whiteness there—he who ought not to be white at all! The father of my master, when he was a good ten years older than M. le Comte, had his crest of hair still black as jet. Has Monsieur noticed the crest? It is the mark of the race—the wolf's head as they say. Yes, yes, there is wolf in every Ruffeleu, beautiful and magnificent as they are! Another cup of coffee? One has slept late this morning."

It was true I had slept late, after heavy dreams. Heavens!—how I dreamt in that old house! The place must have been haunted, I think, by strange passions; for my spirit, released in sleep, went through

such intensities of joy, anguish, and love under its roof, that no waking experience has ever approached them. What should I dream of, the night after Adrienne de Ruffeleu had kissed me, but of her kiss?

"Monsieur le Comte will be ravished when I give so good an account of you. Every morning, on waking, he has asked for you and with a real anxiety. To-day he will see for himself. I am the bearer of a message. Monsieur le Comte invites Mr. de Quercy to do him the honour to dine with him at noon. I will lay out the fine grey suit which I had the privilege of unpacking from Monsieur's recently arrived baggage. His honour will wish to make himself elegant for his first dinner with Monsieur le Comte."

I pushed my plate away, and leant up on my elbow.

"Certainly, certainly," I cried.

No doubt the heat which I felt in my cheek burnt in my voice, for Louradour wheeled round from his task of laying out my best suit and shot a swift sly look at me under his bushy grey eyebrows. Then, taking up the waistcoat and pretending to polish a filigree silver button, he said with an elaborately casual air:

"His honour and my master will be alone. Mademoiselle has ordered her horse."

"Indeed," said I, and my tone was as drab as a moment ago it had been coloured.

"Yes, indeed, Monsieur, 'tis superb weather; a sharpish frost in the night, and the skies of a blue—ah, it is no wonder Mademoiselle should have fancy for a scamper! Above all, as she knows, M. le Comte will not be alone since Monsier dines with him. I go to inform Monseigneur of your acceptance. I will return with the hot water when I consider that digestion is sufficiently advanced."

I fell back on my pillows. "Upon my word," thought I—and if there was wolf in every Ruffeleu there was bear in Charles de Quercy at that moment. "Upon my word, here's a pretty programme! Mademoiselle is to scamper the fields in superb weather, and

SRINAGAR
ACC. NO .....
LIBRARY

I have the amusement of a *tête-à-tête* meal with a host as melancholy-mad as Don Quixote himself!"

I was very short, presently, with Monsieur Louradour the while he inducted me into my best suit, which only for shame of good manners I would have thrust back into the cupboard. Twisting my stock, I heard the crisp trot of a horse, and then the thudding rhythm of a breaking canter; and I could have cursed, only that such a thing was not possible within the hearing of one so respectable, so serviable and so good-humoured as the butler of Rozac.

He preceded me along the echoing passages; down the gaunt stone stairs; through the ante-chamber draped with hangings of cardinal velvet, faded here and there to an incredible wine colour, and lined on either side with long benches, where, in bygone days of splendour, the clients of the great house would wait upon an audience.

Louradour flung open the door and announced me with no less ceremony than upon that first astounding night. I crossed the threshold into the picture gallery; and there stood, against the fireplace as before, the thin dignified figure of my host. But what a change everywhere, above all in the countenance turned to greet me!

The rich mystery of the room, faintly and beautifully lit by clustered wax candles; the shadowy presence of half-revealed portraits; the sense of space intensified by pools of gloom alternating with islands of dim radiance where the flames were reflected on the amber polish of the floor—that was the picture fixed in my memory. Now, flooded with piercing sun-rays, the great chamber seemed forlorn: a dusty, haunted spot, too lofty, too vast, for anything but the melancholy of a falling house and the ghosts of past grandeur. And he who had welcomed me with a gesture that would fain have been an embrace, with an eye gleaming with a hope so ardent that it was wellnigh fierce, advanced now and stretched out a hand, pale and languid and trembling a little, as Louradour had noticed. His glance—how can I describe

the pathos of the look he cast upon me, the sadness and the hopelessness of it? All fire was extinct, all life gone in its hollow setting.

"This is well. This is well," he said.

His lips sketched a smile, his voice was but the echo of his former tones. Well? I thought I had never seen a more poignant image of dignified despair.

"I cannot say, Mr. de Quercy, how it rejoices me to see you here again!"

He took my hand with chill fingers and pressed me towards a chair.

"Sit down, sit down! You are still weak, though it is a great relief to find you so nearly recovered. My young cousin, Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu-Fezensac, has, I know, already expressed something of the endless apologies we owe you. She has explained——" he hesitated. "You certainly were entitled to explanations. Though explanations cannot undo the mischief, by enabling you to understand they may induce you to forgive."

I hardly know what I stammered. I was a fluent youth as a rule, little troubled with self-consciousness and having a comfortable opinion of the superiority of my country in general and myself in particular among the foreigners with whom I was surrounded—always excepting the Goddess of the hills and woods, as became a mere mortal. But I was moved to the very marrow by the old man's courage in affliction. And when, as I stood confused and inarticulate before him, there came into his far-away gaze, as it was turned upon me, a benevolence, a sweetness, something that I can best describe as almost a tenderness, I felt a mist in my own eyes. Considering the bitterness of the disappointment I had brought upon him, the terrible revulsion after the exulting of his pathetic and ill-founded joy, he might well have wished to avoid the sight of me. Indeed, he might, under the grip of his *idée fixe*, have regarded me with execration. But here high breeding went as deep as the heart.

Louradour announced that Monsieur le Comte was

served. It was a welcome diversion for me, in my British dislike of emotion.

There was no real necessity for the old Comte's request of the help of my arm; he walked quite erect and without any faltering, but it was with his hand upon my wrist that we moved to the dining-room.

Here there was no light or warmth of sun to relieve the gloom of an immense apartment. The mullioned windows were overhung by long strands of ivy and tawny vine creepers; the blazoned roof arched so high above our head, that the faded tints of its numberless coats of arms rather pointed the bleakness of the stone walls than relieved them. Up to about twice a man's height a dim arras was hung. I thought that there seemed to come a perpetual whisper and murmur from its folds; the wind was rather high, and currents of air must have crept in between the hangings and the stone.

My host and I sat fairly close to each other at one end of the long banqueting table. Each time the butler came and went in attentive service his steps echoed forlornly. And, to complete the impression of melancholy which gathered ever more closely upon me, the Comte now laid himself out to entertain me with sprightly conversation!

I declare, if the board beneath my plate had been the oak of his missing heir's coffin, I could not have felt the effort to be more incongruous. Yet it was valiant. And Louradour greeted it with such enraptured airs of smiling attention that, obviously, Castel-Rozac must have been wont to hold darker depths of depression.

"What have we here? Potage Ventadour: a family dish, *ma foi!* That is clever of Coperneau—Coperneau is my chef. He once ruled in the kitchen of my cousin de Noailles, but even artists grow old! The fellow has consented to our solitudes—an honourable *retraite*, one may say! This potage Ventadour is a legacy of my great-uncle Rohan—a minor glory! The most strength-renewing brew ever devised—one cockerel to a cupful,

I understand. My great-uncle had a bowl of it every day of his life. Yes," said the old gentleman, with a faint smile, "if the gossip of the time is to be taken as warranty, my great-uncle required daily a good deal of reconstituting. Do me the favour to take another helping. No?—Very well. Then, after a Truite Meunière—Meunière, I hold it, is your only perfect treatment of trout—we will discuss the partridge which the old rascal—who has his own artistic ambitions—has permission to call *à la Ruffeleu*. Some secret in the firing, or what not, which I understand he proposes to bequeath to me in his testament! Following which, and a finger or two of Porto, I think I shall be able to tell Roubilliac that we have carried out his orders, to the essence and the spirit."

While he plied me, he himself made no further progress with the meal than the drinking of his bowl of the vaunted soup, and the slow sipping of half a bumper of burgundy. For the rest, he made mere hollow play with knife and fork. But the wine was generous; and by the time the silver dish of grapes was set with a flourish before him, a flush had crept to his ashen cheek and a returning sonority into his voice.

"Roubilliac will be pleased," he said, lying back and surveying me with his kindly gaze. "An honest fellow, Roubilliac, if not as sound as he might be in certain opinions. I suspect him of a tenderness towards that Bonaparte brigand.—Ah," he exclaimed, "how wise you English are to cage me the bird of prey in proper security this time!"

His head was turned from me as he spoke. He smiled, bitterly; and I, who had been hypnotized by the curious atmosphere, the dimness and heaviness of the room, was startled as I looked at him.

"There is always wolf in Ruffeleu," had said Louradour that morning, with an odd sort of pride. There was certainly wolf in the aspect I caught of my sad and courteous host at that moment. His lip was uplifted sarcastically, showing the canines, which I perceived to be large and pointed. And the white

crest of hair against the dark background seemed slightly yet perceptibly to bristle. I remembered then with a thrill how it had risen at me in the frenzy of his anguish, just before our catastrophic fall together. He turned back to me, and the impression was gone in a minute.

"You look pale," he said; "it is cold here. Let us to the library, where Louradour will serve our coffee. There are always a couple of logs burning on the hearth there."

He took me under the elbow, this time, as he went towards the door.

"Yes, you are quite fatigued," he proceeded. "You have still many days of convalescence here before you." He bore down the protest he felt rising to my lips. "Not a word. That is a settled thing. Castel-Rozac must see you lusty before it opens its gates to let you pass out. As for me, do not misunderstand when I say I am glad you still should require care. It is a pleasure to me to have youth about me. I am not so old as perhaps you might think. Not by the count of years at least."

He gave a long sigh; one of those sighs drawn as it were from illimitable depths. I felt as if the gates of Castel-Rozac were those of a prison house; that they were clanging to upon me with a relentlessness that echoed in my soul.

We had entered the library; and though this was a long mellow apartment, book-lined, lit with sunshine and warmed with a rosy log fire, yet it seemed to me filled with a more profound sense of misery than I had even yet felt. It was no mere ghost of the past that haunted it; it was its owner's living thought. At that moment I told myself that even if it came to a secret flitting in the dawn, nothing would induce me to remain here longer than the necessity of my weakness demanded. But my eye fell upon a gauntletted glove that lay on the floor, dropped from a careless hand, and on the instant, my whole mood veered round.

"You are very kind," I said. "Heaven knows I

regret nothing that has brought me the privilege of being your guest."

He did not seem to notice the new fervour of my tone, though I myself blushed at the sound of it. People made very elaborate phrases in those days.

"Well, well," he said, "it need not be time wasted, for you at least. Nay, it may even be time profitably employed. You can make this your headquarters. And yonder," he waved towards the shelves, are wise pedagogues and counsellors waiting for consultation."

It seemed to me as if it had been a poor pedantic youth out of another life who had once thought there might be work for a man's energies in the wild past of Rouergue. I tried to seem convinced; to look learned and absorbed, while my host started to discourse on the history and topography of the district, producing a massive tome or two in support of theory and argument. But all the time my brain was filled with visions of flying skirts in the amber light of setting suns. I was for ever wandering along white powdery roads; now jealous, now rapturous; now in pursuit, now in company; and then catching myself back to the sad room, to the far-away, haunted didactic voice.

Anyone who has found himself in a similar situation, an invalid to boot, lying at ease in the cushions of a deep armchair, before a comforting fire, will not be surprised to learn that the struggle ended for me in the surrender of sleep.

I opened my eyes right into the golden gaze of Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu.

She stood in a shaft of sunset light and for a single bewildered moment it seemed to me as if all the radiance sprang from her. I heard her laugh and started from my chair. Brisco was beside her, sitting on his haunches; his great head slightly on one side, his tongue lolling out of his mouth, flickering with every panting breath. I could have sworn he was laughing too.

"Sit down again," said my Diana.

She herself sank before the hearth, and sitting on the fur rug, she glanced up at me and laughed afresh.

"I am fated to behold your slumbers! There, there, do not blush,—my good cousin was entertaining you, no doubt. One knows that—'It was she brought Rohan into the family'—'My great-great-uncle—he who married, in first espousals, the heiress of Montmorency-Mirafiore—*et patati, et patata*.'—Faith, if I had to sit through it myself, on the most glorious autumn afternoon of the year, I'd go mad! But you—you go to sleep. You are a quiet young man. It is very admirable."

"And you," said I, trying to meet her sarcasm with sarcasm, after the fashion of any nettled youth, "you were hunting, I suppose. I hope you found your quarry?"

She frowned, with a dilatation of the nostril that gave her vivacious face a sudden resemblance to her cousin. Her tawny hair sprang in a magnificent wave from her white forehead, and was tied at the back of her neck. I wondered whether, had it not been thus secured, it would have risen at me upon the pulse of wrath, and lost myself for a second in that contemplation. And then I saw that even her frown had not been for me!

"The scent was bad," she said. "I only brought back this."

She lifted her hat from the rug beside her; it was full of nuts. She cracked one between white teeth and flung half the shell at Brisco (who solemnly put his paw on it) and the other half into the fire.

"I do not offer you any. I should not then have enough for myself. But that is just as well, for they might not agree with your throat. How cross you look! Have you not a more friendly air to show me, when I am so amiable with you? Am I not ready to devote myself to your entertainment, after your penance with my cousin? My good cousin, he is no doubt in the Chapel. This is his hour for meditation. 'My soul to God, I pray,' you know. He's on his knees. Ah! the poor old man!"

(L Acc No 21597)

There was an indescribable mixture of pity and mockery in her voice. Her russet eyes became fixed, with a transient sombreness on the flaming logs, which lit red gleams in them, and tipped her long lashes as with infinitesimal sparks. The level ray of the sinking sun caught her bare head. She looked like a creature of fire. If Diana, a Diana of the harvest now, all incandescent with the glow of corn and marigold!

She split another nut, with a fierce crunch of her strong teeth, and, flinging the shells from her, cried:

"Sometimes I ask myself what I am doing here—I, La Louvecelle! Oh! the days, the hours, the minutes in this Castel-Rozac, Castle-Tedium! Castle-Weariness! Castle Despair!—I, who hate even the walls about me, stifled with curtains and shut windows, and my cousin droning—poor old man, when he is not groaning! And Louradour with his bows! I—who have slept in the open for weeks, with the stars as a canopy; who have ridden among men at dawn, and bivouacked in the dark—comrade among comrades—with death in the wind and the prospect of a grave in the furrows at the end of the day.—Heaven! if you but knew the zest of life when the end may come for you in an hour! How you stare, Mr. de Quercy! I warrant I've had as many adventures in a month as you would ever find in all your books—I, the daughter of a leader of La Vendée; brought up in those bloodstained plains, with but one thought always: to fight like Madame de Savenaye, for the honour of God and my country, for the overthrown altar and the dishonoured flag!"

Her young voice rang out and vibrated, true as a clarion call. If a little while ago she had seemed to me a creature of fire, now it was as if flame leaped from her. Yet characteristically she ended her outburst with a laugh:

"Mercy! Do not open your eyes any wider, Mr. de Quercy, lest they should fall out of your head. You are terribly shocked, I see! To strum tum-ti-tum at the clavecin, and warble a little song; to draw a needleful of silk through a bit of satin; to tinkle a line of verse

à la Deshoulières, or dab you a crooked Cupid on a fan —that is the ideal of young ladyhood in England—for the matter of that, in France, too. And that is why my noble relations in the Faubourg St. Germain have repudiated me—why I prefer Castel-Rozac, desolate as it is, to the honours of a young-ladylike existence in Paris. My poor old cousin, if he could, he would control me too. But—ah! no!" She flung up her beautiful alert head. "Ah, no, indeed, the Louvecelle has tasted the freedom of the woods. She is not to be caged in a rabbit hutch!"

Something in the look she cast at me relegated me among the rabbits. I exclaimed—I feel sure it was acrimoniously:

"You cannot have the least idea of my tastes, Mademoiselle. And as for yours, I would not presume, I assure you, to criticise them. You have a proverb: 'All tastes are respectable.'"

"Hear him, my old Brisco!" she cried, catching the dog around the neck. "If he were not so very polite, he would fling up his hands, and cry 'Shocking, shocking!'—Believe me, sir," she went on, with a sudden capricious movement, flinging the whole hatful of nuts amid the logs, "I can perfectly realise the commotion in your British mind at finding yourself sitting opposite a young lady who has actually shot her fellow-creatures and has no remorse for the deed. Now I'll wager you've never pointed a gun at anything more fierce than a partridge or a hare—unless indeed it might be a fox."

My galled vanity found relief in a shout of sarcastic laughter.

"Oh, Mademoiselle de Fézensac, how admirably you understand our English sporting ways!"

"Mr. de Quercy," said she demurely, "do not laugh so loud. It cannot be good for your throat."

She rose to her feet with a movement as lithe and easy as if she had been really the wild being of the woods to which it was her pleasure to liken herself. I was too much shaken after my illness to have complete

self-control; her taunting ways and looks had stung me; and I was in love. And all the startling things she had told me of herself; the vivid revelation of her that I had gathered while she spoke—untamed, untameable; fierce, relentless, reckless—had bewildered and—yes, it is true, shocked me—yet plunged me deeper than before into love. I was pale, I am sure. I bit a trembling lip. She looked down at me; and the scorn on her face gave place to a softness I had never seen there before.

"Come, Mr. de Quercy," she said, "here's my paw. Like my Brisco, there is no real malice in me. I would not hurt a fly but for the defence of what I love."

She gave me her hand. A warm, strong, sunburned hand; not small, but so exquisitely shaped! The hand that had been dipped in the blood of her fellow-countrymen.

She let her grasp remain in mine as if I had been one of her comrades.

"Ah, you do not know what it means to be a daughter of Vendée," she went on, her tones deepening into a wonderful chord of grave emotion. "Every day as a child, when I went in and out of the courtyard at home, I passed the door of the stable stained by the blood of one of my father's men. The poor fellow had caught up a pitchfork to defend my father's horses against the Blues—the base renegade soldiery that were let loose upon us, burning our homes, desecrating our churches, slaying, pillaging as they came. Six of them had surrounded him, pointing death at him. Even they hesitated for a moment to murder this one brave man. '*Rendez-vous! Rendez-vous!*' they were shouting. But he would not, and as they drove their bayonets into him he cried with his last breath: '*Rendez-moi mon Dieu!*' So he was found, transfixed, when my father rode back with his own men. My father never would have that loyal blood washed from the door!"

She drew her hand from mine and turned away. Another woman would have been in tears; but, although the reflection of the flaming logs could not reach La

Louvecelle's tawny eyes, and the sunset glory had faded, there was a red fire of fierceness in them. My heart sank.

"You are a quiet young man," she had said to me. Good God, how could such as I ever even dream of winning her! Her mate must be some savage comrade of the hills; Loup-Cervier leaping from the lair with his wild wolf-call to greet her!

Anyone who has watched an eagle in captivity knows the moment when the creature suddenly wakes from apparent apathy, lifts its head and stretches its wings; testing, upon an impulse of savage despair, its strength against its chain. It seemed to me that Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu had given me some such glimpse of her rebelling spirit.

Finding her, the next afternoon, seated before the chess-board with her cousin, while outside a bright east wind sent the yellow leaves spinning, and chased white sun-steeped clouds across a wonderful blue sky, I hardly needed to look at her to know the impetuous fret of her whole being. She wore a habit many-folded round her slender waist. It was of the grey she favoured. Upon one chair were flung her gloves, her whip on another; her hat on the floor beside her. And Brisco, stretched in an attitude of hopeless resignation, his great muzzle between his paws, kept an unwinking yellow eye upon her.

The old gentleman, his thin hands folded, gave me a faint smile of welcome—we already had met at the noonday meal—and absorbed himself again in the contemplation of his pieces.

Adrienne cast one quick look at me. Had I been responsible for her penance, it could not have been more charged with fury. Her teeth gnawed her underlip; her slender foot tapped the carpet under the folds of grey cloth. While her opponent deliberated, she lifted her hand two or three times tentatively over the board, and then noiselessly snapped her fingers; he made no sign and the hand quivered with repressed exasperation.

Yet her good heart was evidently stronger than her wild humour.

At last my host made up his mind, and shifted a knight. The move was an imprudent one and Diana had the game in her hands. But impetuosity is a bad counsellor : she rushed her bishop into a post of hideous danger ; and, to the sound of a little chuckle, the Comte's knight laid sacrilegious hands upon it.

"Ah!" said I, involuntarily. "And in two moves you could have checkmated him!"

She looked up at me, at first with as near a scowl as her vivid face could assume, then broke into ringing laughter.

"Mr. de Quercy is a chess-player? Mr. de Quercy has every talent. Quick, my cousin, let us finish this stupid game and you will have an adversary worthy of your skill."

"Indeed, my dear child," said the old gentleman, with something nearer contentment than I had yet beheld in him, "it will not be long now before I have completely disposed of you."

"So much the better, then. Look at our guest! Look at him! Why, he is simply burning to have my place! Behold the ardour in his eyes! Ah, what it is to have the chess-playing mania!"

"Mademoiselle," I began hotly, her mockery goaded me this time to real indignation, "Mademoiselle, I must protest——"

It was not because of the defiant air that mutely dared me contradict her ; nor was it from any altruistic desire to give the wild thing the freedom of the woods ; it was a glance at Monsieur de Ruffeleu's face which arrested me. I could not have refused myself to what was so evidently his single pleasure. It would have been like striking a confident child.

"And, in effect, my little Adrienne," he murmured, while his old ivory-coloured hand hovered over the final decision, "in effect, to find Mr. de Quercy a chess-player is an unexpected good fortune."

He was as eager to have done with the neophyte as

she herself was to be done with the game. A new leap of the White Knight mated the Black King. Thereupon, Mademoiselle jumped up. With equal alacrity, Monsieur began to marshal his pieces afresh.

She went to the window, followed by her hound who stood yawning and stretching his great limbs. She flung the casement open; then, leaning against the mullion, her forehead resting on the back of her hand, she stared out over the wide lands and up into the scurrying clouds. Just as her cousin had placed the last pawn, with the slow conscientiousness of age, upon its destined square, she wheeled round upon me. It seemed as if the play of the clouds had passed into her face, all the radiance of the autumn day into her eyes.

"See how everything is smoothed to the soul of good will!" she exclaimed. "There you two are, as happy as kings, and in another minute Blanchette and I will be as happy as queens!"

At the door she paused for a final gibe at me:

"It is you who said, 'All tastes are respectable,' Mr. de Quercy; but what a strange taste to prefer the chess-board——"

Her cousin interrupted her by testily bidding her shut the window, arresting me by a movement of the hand as I would have jumped up and forestalled her.

She complied; then went out of the room without another word; and it seemed to me that, with her bright head, all the sunshine went too.

The old man stared after her with something of trouble in his melancholy eyes.

"You must wonder, Mr. de Quercy," he said at last, "at the unusual freedom I allow my young relative."

He bore down my inept "Not at all!" with a slight raising of the voice.

"Certainly you must wonder. Even with you in England, where ladies enjoy, I remember, greater independence than with us, it is not usual to allow the young girl to go her way unescorted even upon her parent's lands. But the case is exceptional. My youthful cousin has had a singular experience of life."

"I know," said I, abruptly—I cannot say quite why it was, but I very much disliked discussing her with her guardian—"she has told me."

He eyed me with surprise; and for the first time in our intercourse with some haughtiness.

"You have had further conversation with Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu, then?"

I did not reply. His tone displeased me. He pondered, then smoothed his brow.

"She thought the situation demanded some explanation. I am glad to hear it. I am glad to hear it," he repeated. "It shows she realises the dangers of her unconventionality more than she will admit to me."

Again I was silent. He reflected a further appreciable moment of time, then sighed, and made an opening on the board.

I was a fair chess-player, and I soon found that the dear old gentleman knew very little more about the game than the actual movements of the pieces. I took a certain benevolent pleasure, therefore, in playing just well enough to excite his eagerness to the utmost; and then allowing him the glory of victory on a practically denuded board.

He leant back in his chair at last; joined his finger-tips together and smiled at me, this heart-broken man, with a guileless triumph.

"Aha, I am not so old or so stupid yet, I see, but that I can hold my own in this noble game! But never be downcast, young man. No one can be a chess-player that has not, so to speak, mellowed at it. It is impetuosity, the raw impetuosity of youth, that brings defeat. You have aptitude. You made with your rook, there, a brilliant move. Brilliant, but——"

He was leaning over the board now, gesticulating with long pale fingers. Stifling my yawns, I listened with the best appearance of reverence. Indeed it would have taken a harder and a stronger nature than mine to dash my poor old host in this momentary relaxation.

"No doubt, sir," said I, "if you allow me the privilege of studying your strategy now and again——"

Yes, indeed, with all my weary spirit panting to be in the winds and the woods; longing as I was, in the folly of my most unfounded passion, to be beside her, in lonely paths, under the rustle of the turning foliage, out in the golden autumn world, I riveted my own chains with an explicable, a bitter conscientiousness! Perhaps at the back of my mind I had some mean, unacknowledged hope of currying favour in a quarter where, if influence could not avail me much, opposition might nevertheless be fatal.

If this were the case I was promptly punished. As he pushed the chessmen back into place with a long finger-nail grown and clipped to a point, after a French fashion that made me shudder, the Comte de Ruffeleu, warmed, by his superiority and my deference, to something that almost approached geniality, harked back to the subject of his strange young kinswoman.

"It may well be nightfall," said he, glancing at the mackerelled patches of sunlight on the floor that were already shifting and turning honey colour, "before that wild child comes home. The other night—indeed it was the night of your arrival here——" His own discursive memory had brought him back to the old pain. A pallor swept over his face and his voice took a far-away, unhappy note; yet he pursued steadfastly: "She did not return until darkness had quite set in. I meant to have reproved her. It ought not to happen again. Sometimes I wish"—his eye was upon me, but his thought was at a measureless distance—"sometimes I wish that she had been a boy. She would have made a noble boy, that brave and audacious child! If not of my own branch of the old house, she is Ruffeleu of the truest, and would have carried on the race——" He broke off, wincing.

"And can she not, nevertheless, carry on the race? Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu will surely marry."

The words leaped from my mouth. I had all a young man's horror of the sight of mental suffering. Perhaps, also, my own mad dream gave ardour to my tone.

He started, stiffened himself in his chair and turned his countenance full upon me, his white head bristling, his eyes fixed and gleaming; his lips drawn back from his teeth. It was the mask of the wolf, set in wrath. A wrath so disproportionate to the offence, that I realised at once that my words had involuntarily touched him on the *idée fixe*.

"Marry? Certainly, sir, Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu will marry. But it will be the one I have chosen for her, and him only! Marry! If the idea has come to you that Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu would marry any ordinary kind of stray young man, disabuse yourself of it once and for all. There is one, and one only. One who is living. Who is living, I tell you!"

"Pray, sir," cried I, and though I knew the poor old man was a monomaniac, yet my anger rose to meet his, "no ordinary stray young man, as you say, would venture to aspire to the hand of the lady. She will mate with her kind," I cried, harking back to the conviction that was but too sorely imprinted on my mind. "I know that very well, as all must who have once laid eyes on La Louvecelle!"

His anger fell from him. Changes of mood in the not-quite-sane do not follow the natural transitions of well-balanced brains. His passage from rage to an overwhelming urbanity took my breath away.

"You are right. You are right! Ah, you are a good young man. The last Ruffeleu can only mate with Ruffeleu itself. Adrienne must wait for the heir of Rozac. I have said so to myself—and to her—a hundred times. I have——"

He stopped short, his crazy gaze now riveted upon me. It deepened as he looked, embraced me from head to foot, and came back to rest upon my face. I would have liked to hide myself away from it, because of the unbearable tenderness it held.

"A pity! A pity!" said he. As if thinking aloud, he spoke in a murmur, rather than with conscious voice. "It might have been——! For half an hour—one blessed half-hour!—I felt, as sure as that we are living

men now, that I was beholding my son, at last! That he was all I could have wished. The son of my race! How I joyed in telling him of the honours which soon he would know to be his own! How I joyed in the thought of the fortune, the state, the love that awaited him in the future! Ah, my God! Half an hour—in a lifetime—I had my son before my eyes—as I thought, as I thought!"

A poignant compassion seized me; compassion mixed with an odd, unreasonable sense of shame, or regret rather, for having been the cause of torture and disappointment. He had fallen back, ashen pale. In his eyes slow tears were gathering: tears of stern old age, like the last drops of sap wrung in anguish from a withered bough.

"I feel it all with you, sir," I said, after a while, hesitatingly. "Indeed I marvel at your generosity, at your hospitality for one who——"

He arrested me with a gesture.

"A gentleman who has met mishap under my roof, an honoured guest——" But emotion, as singular as it was genuine, broke up the elaborate politeness of his protest. "I thought you were my son," he said, with a catch in his throat. "I can never forget that.—This is weakness, Mr. de Quercy, shall we measure wits again? I should be almost glad to see you take your revenge, but would not insult your talent by making it easy."

So I was doomed to one of the severest trials of patience I have ever been subjected to in my life. I cursed myself for my weak-minded amiability. I almost cursed Adrienne de Ruffeleu for the abominable trick she had played me. I remembered her tapping toe, her gnawing teeth, her quivering hand; and felt a kindred frenzy of irritation possess me. But I could not curse the broken man who found zest in his infantile conception of the Royal Game. . . . Nay, underneath my froth and fret, there was growing for him in my heart an odd sort of half-protective, half-reverential affection which remained fixed upon pleasuring him.

For the next two hours silence reigned in the room. It would be idle to pretend that I gave much thought to the play. But now and again, when inadvertently I had made the right move, I had to bring myself with some energy to the reparation of such a want of tact. My mind, like an ill-mannered hound, was perpetually breaking away from discipline, in pursuit of the roving lady! . . . Her white mare flew before me, a perpetual tantalization, swift and intangible; a scud before the storm, white across white and russet downs, under a white and blue sky.

We ended upon the absurdity of a stalemate.

Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu did not justify her cousin's apprehension. The stain of the sunset, rose-amber, had scarce begun to fade on the panel opposite me, when she re-entered the room; blown in, as it were, upon a gust of fresh wind. Never before had I beheld such a vision of joy. My heart sank. She went up to her cousin and kissed him on the forehead: an unwonted demonstration, but it was as if she must share with some one her glory of life. She gave me a smile and a nod as from a brilliant distance, and tossed her gauntlets upon the table between us.

"Cousin Gontran, I have had the two best hours of my life!"

"Indeed!" commented he. He lay back, contemplating her. There was irony in the lift of his eyebrow, but there was possessive admiration in his gaze. And, truly, she was a creature to be proud of, with that redoubled fire in her eye and carmine in her cheek. Beauty and flame had always been latent in her; but in this moment they had bloomed into the perfect flower.

"Indeed!" said her relative. "The best hours of your life? No, I do not believe they have yet come upon you." He smiled. To look at her was to hope—except for me, for whom this ecstasy of hers spelt disaster. "Nevertheless," he pursued, "that you should think you have reached the earthly climax is an event worth noting. Blanchette went very well, I surmise?"

"Like an angel!"

"And the afternoon has been fine?"

"Oh! my cousin, the sky is like a sapphire! And the wind blows, oh exquisite! Tart and sweet—it's like—like biting an apple!" She broke into laughter. She seemed to be singing rather than speaking. "And all the scents of heaven are on the breeze. And—and——"

"And you had good sport, I suppose?" I said.

I strove to speak indifferently, but my voice was cutting as a blade, even in my own ear. I was not like that poor dupe, caressing his impossible plans. I saw straight into the translucent mystery. The Louvecelle and the Loup-Cervier had met in the heart of the woods, and she—she had returned to us all incarnadined with lover's joy.

She surveyed me a second, tilting her chin; defiance, mockery, amusement, seemed struck from her like so many sparks.

"I had good hunting, sir," she said, "while you—you sat stuffed up here, shoving bits of ivory from square to square the whole lovely golden day."

I was minded of the arrogance of a driver, who flicks with his whip at the wretched pedestrian who has dared to be on the road when he and his horses dash by. It was the basest ingratitude besides. Yet, with a furious ache of my whole being, I understood the cruelty that springs from a flawless splendour of content.

CHAPTER VI

THE WOLF-MASTER OF OLD—AND THE NEW

WE sat all three on the terrace, discussing our coffee after the midday meal. As if Autumn knew that its days of glory were numbered, it condescended to a peculiar tenderness of sun and of balmy airs, like one who, on parting, would fain leave but a kindly impression.

Below, in the valley, the smoke from village roofs rose in faint, straight blue columns; little trailing mists hung in the hollows; and if a leaf fell, it was of its own decay, for there was not breath enough to set it stirring. A day it was of the most gentle atmosphere; pensive, exquisite. The sunshine was pale yellow upon the stone, and the blue of the sky imperceptibly veiled. Somewhere in the depths of the tawny trees below the terrace walls a robin sang, piercing the hush with frail sweet note: the very hour itself in music.

We sat silent; but I felt in such complete harmony with my surroundings that speech seemed a thing unnecessary, almost intrusive. The last four days had been very quiet. No doubt volcanoes were at work in the old house, but the flames had drawn back into their secret caverns. Placidity reigned at Castel-Rozac. I had tested my strength by daily walks; and, with returning vigour, was better able to control the trouble at my heart. The Comte and I had our games of chess. He, too, was notably calmer. There was a reason for this. On the previous day he had informed me at noon that, it being the vigil of a special anniversary in his life, he must apologize for leaving me to my own resources.

"I shall be preparing," he said, "for my duties—the duties of my religion which I always accomplish on this day," he added, seeing, no doubt, a want of comprehension on my Protestant countenance.

He spoke in tones of pride; and I remembered Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu's half-mocking allusion to the family device. But, though it was her pleasure to jeer, I soon found that she, too, had the same attitude towards her faith. From sheer lassitude of loneliness, I had begged to be allowed to join the afternoon service, which further marked the occasion, in the castle chapel.

Here, the very air seemed centuries old. What a treasure-house for the antiquary, had the moment been propitious! The place was full of banners, old carvings, tombs of stone and alabaster. Through stained-glass windows where heraldic devices, angels' wings and figures of saints were blended in dreamlike mixture, patches of jewelled light were cast upon the curves of pillars, upon the joined hands of a stone crusader . . . upon Adrienne's hair flaming through a film of veil.

I saw her stand, heard her sing a Latin hymn; but she was, I thought, more like some young knight flinging challenges to the enemies of his King than a sinner praying for mercy. Her eye turned from the altar to the white flag with the gules roses, that, incredibly torn and faded, hung over the tomb of Gontran II.—faith, and loyalty, and "the honours" of Rozac, all inseparably welded together, as the device of Ruffeleu proclaimed!

The count's proud white head was bent. I saw his clasped hands wrung before his hidden face—and I guessed what desperate appeals were being cast upward with every swing of the censer.

I had, of course, all the intolerance of my youth and of my insular education in a reformed religion; I thought the whole business pagan and foolish, with its incense and candles and flowers; with the white Host amid its blazing rays of jewels, and the priest's regulated movements, his constant genuflexion, his barbaric

vestments, gold-embroidered and jewelled too. Nevertheless, I could not deny that there was something in the eyes fixed upon the altar, even by the peasants about me, which I had never seen in any of our own churches; and it could not be denied, either, that the poor old lord of all this fading glory brought something away from that chapel which filled his haunted gaze for a time with a singular gentle peace.

On this day, therefore, the feeling of quietude was still upon us. Adrienne sat lost in dreams, with her feet on Brisco's devoted back. The Comte, sipping his *petit-verre*, seemed to have given himself, for the moment, to a pure physical comfort. The sunshine was gently warm on his bare head; and, now and again, his eye rested upon me with that air of pleasure which was to me so inexpressibly touching.

It is so long ago that I find it difficult now to disentangle facts from fancies, sensations and yearnings from intentions. But I rather think I had made up my mind, on that afternoon, to forego in dignity what I had no hope of attaining; and that it was in a kind of delightful luxury of renouncement that I too dreamed away the October hour, feeling little currents of sympathy pass between us.

One memory, however, stands apart in my mind: a memory of penetrating peace, curiously to be filled anon with images, reminiscences, gossip and lore, all on the subject of that most savage of beasts, the wolf.

Louradour had proclaimed it: "There is always Wolf where you have Ruffeleu." And indeed from the hour of the hill-top meeting, my relations with the family of Rozac had been Wolf-haunted. Adrienne's first words to me had been of wolves. She had watched my slumbers, she declared, lest the wolves should find me. She had mocked and tested me with wolfine talk, and introduced herself as La Louvecelle. After she had parted from me, and I had seen her emerge upon the heights, I had heard her called with a wild ululating wolf-cry by her comrade of the woods, as if both had

indeed been the free savage creatures they mimicked for secret purposes of their own.

And Loup-Cervier! Though the name is old French for the keen-eyed feline we call lynx, I felt it had been bestowed and adopted because, in its mere sound, the name imaged some idea of mastership in the wolf-tribe. The name of Ruffeleu, itself—Bate-Wolf, or Hustle-Wolf—had, no doubt, some traditional connection.

As these thoughts floated through my mind, I turned my eyes involuntarily to the carving which I knew surmounted the lintel of the terrace door, and contemplated it with a new interest. It was, in heraldic parlance, *a wolf's head erased.* Muzzle pointed upwards, it held between formidable teeth *a slipped rose proper.* The straw yellow sun-ray slid across it as I gazed, and I saw the creeping lichens shine yellow within the curves. Where the great jaws opened, some minute moss showed red, like a gout of blood.

"Surely," I exclaimed, on the impulse, "there must be an interesting legend connected with this *canting* crest!"

The student had once more started awake in me. . . . Already, in those far-away years, it was my earnest vocation to delve into the Past and make the dry bones live, to restore lost colours, and regroup forgotten scenes.

The Comte de Ruffeleu, on his side, was never loath to discourse upon any subject connected with his family traditions.

"Most certainly there is a legend," he said, lifting himself in his chair, colour reviving in his faded voice.

It was far back in the history of the family; indeed beyond the spot where record was lost in legend. Somewhere amid the darkest hours of that dark period, the heiress of Rozac—she through whom the present lands bearing that name came into the family—was carried off by a robber lord of the Gévaudan mountains. He was called *le Loup*, the wolf of the Cevennes; and she the Rose of Guyenne.

The old seigneur became very eloquent. I was interested and amused. Indeed (if my own old-man discursiveness may here be pardoned) I will mention that one of my most successful contributions to archæological literature is the monograph in which I proved—using the legend of Rozac as my foundation stone, so to speak—how inevitably "inversion" grows in the handing on of tradition. I could have had no fitter illustration of my argument than this instance of the manner in which the wolf becomes the wolf-hunter; the token of defeat becomes the very crest of the helm.

Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu sighed loudly as her relative, pushed by my questions and learned comments, held forth. Presently she yawned, with the most elaborate distension that ever marred beauty, and pretended to fall asleep.

My host, now well launched, had begun to enumerate the list of ancestors who had borne, in unbroken descent, the distinction of being Wolf-Master—*Maître Louvetier*—of their province, a very high office, in the royal favour. Partly to interrupt a recitation which, even to my antiquarian ear, was growing tedious, partly, no doubt, in the desire to display my youthful knowledge, I in turn uplifted my voice.

In our peaceful island country, I pointed out, the name of Wolf-Master was one which suggested no meaning. For at least three hundred years, England had not known the ravages of wolves. In the reign of Charles II., indeed, one Cameron of Lochiel, in the wild Highlands of Scotland, is reported to have killed the very last wolf on British soil; but the special office of Wolf-slayer had lapsed, long before that time, I explained—with some satisfaction in the statement.

The Comte de Ruffeleu (upon such various grounds do different nations pride themselves!) found an equal satisfaction in replying that in France it was not so. The office of Louvetier was one still maintained; and that through urgent need. He himself had been Royal Lieutenant de Louveterie for Guyenne under the *ancien*

régime; and in the last year that he had held office, the heads of one hundred and sixty wolves slain in the province had been hung in rows in his courtyard. But the Revolution had, naturally, abolished a post at once so aristocratic and so beneficent. With what result? —He spread his diaphanous hands.—There were horrible tales of the increase of the wolves during those years of chaos: they formed, indeed, a Reign of Terror of their own. Even now, every year, not to speak of grave losses among the flocks, scores of lives were sacrificed in the wild parts of this land—children from the villages, wayfarers, lonely woodcutters, charcoal men——

I uttered an exclamation. There had been grave earnestness, then, underlying that warning, up on the bluff, the first day of our meeting—that warning which I had thought merely La Louvecelle's play! I glanced at the elaborately unconscious countenance of the scornful lady. My gaze lingered. Her face, then set in repose, had taken a severity that reminded me of some Greek medal. There was a classic purity of line in her features, in spite of a certain irregularity; and something of that intensity in repose which is so peculiarly the classic secret.

Through drooped eyelids she felt and resented the indiscretion of my scrutiny, and her brow quivered into a frown. I hastily returned my attention to the Comte, and at haphazard flung him an answer to the last caught phrase.

"But, surely the restored Monarch ought to be approached for the re-establishment of so necessary a post."

Instantly there was a flicker of the wolf menace about the old nobleman's countenance. My remark was not tactful, on more than one account.

"Do you mean that I should appeal for what I regard as a right, Mr. de Quercy? No, no, that is never Ruffeleu way.—Restoration, say you? Is anything ever restored? Royalty is back, it is true; but royal ways—royal thoughts—no! I am not criticizing. I

should not presume to criticize: 'My Faith, my King, always!' And indeed, were it offered to me again, the old hereditary post of power and honour, what should I do with it? Had I the strength, I had not the heart for it. I—alone—what are hereditary rights to such an one?"

The great sigh with which I was becoming familiar interrupted his speech. I tried to cover my mistake.

"As an antiquarian," I faltered—at twenty-four I was fond of alluding to myself as an antiquarian—"I cannot but regret the abolition of so picturesque an institution."

He caught me up sharply.

"Abolition? I never said abolished. It is not abolished, my young friend. But like so many other good old ways, it has derogated. Derogated. One hears everywhere of quite impossible people recognized as Louvetiers. Here—well, here, no doubt the wolves are being kept down."—He made a contemptuous gesture, as if that were a mere secondary detail. "*Merci* to them on that score! But the *Grands Louvetiers de France* of my youth, and these gentry—these gentry of Langévol!—positively, Mr. de Quercy, people you cannot meet! At Langévol dwell my successors in the noble office—my successors, if you please!"

The name revived my waning attention.

"Langévol! The cliff-castle?—Do you mean the singular place near Millac, cut out of the hill-rock, under which disappears a branch of the Tarn?"

"Yes, that is the place. A ruin now, like our old towers over there. An object of special study perhaps? You seem interested."

I was interested. In the whole of Rouergue, that celebrated spot formed the best prize of archæological exploration; and when I had started on my French travels, I had intended to make of it the foundation stone of my future fame. I began to enlarge on my already acquired knowledge. Was it not in one of the mysterious caves of the cliff-castle that was hidden the legendary treasure of Gilles Maschefer and Matthieu

Goulenoire ; the untold accumulation of gold and silver, proceeds of half a century's pillage, Church desecration and ransomings? These fourteenth-century triumphant brigands had at last been exterminated in the days of Duguesclin, during the Spanish incursions. So much I had discovered for myself in my researches among the Cotton Manuscripts. But Monsieur de Ruffeleu, I explained, was not to imagine that I was treasure-hunting. And, indeed, too many expeditions of the kind had been made in those regions for any illusions to exist on that score. All these tales of treasure, I declared loftily, were certain to be myths ; especially that tradition concerning still older hoardings which were supposed to have escaped the spoliation of the Templars, a whole century before my pair of robbers. Nevertheless I could not deny that they added to the attraction an atmosphere of romance that allured me. Besides which, this remarkable specimen of rock architecture, with its extraordinary system of underground work, was, I understood, the best of its kind.

I do not think I should have held forth with quite such pompous self-assurance had it not been for the attitude of Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu. As I started my dissertation upon Langévol, she opened her eyes and sat forward, and during my continued speech fixed me with an ever profounder air of attention. In youthful vanity, I imagined that she was struck by my knowledge, intelligence and cultivation. "Here," said I to myself, "is a clever girl, lost in the heart of the country, among ignorant narrow-minded people. Handsome cavalier may her Loup-Cervier be ; dashing Chouan, and romantic conspirator ; but intellect is not bred in the wolf haunts" . . . Ah, many a time have I blushed when I recalled how I sat and orated ; and how she looked at me ; and how I secretly plumed myself! . . . I smile now, as if the poor silly boy, with his smattering of science, was not myself but a separate entity. And there is a melancholy in my amusement, when I remember the freshness and ardour of the hopes that sprang in his heart the while.

My cheeks were burning as I concluded.

"Indeed you are right, Monsieur de Ruffeleu, in surmising that Langévol is the objective of my travels in this direction. It was actually with that intention that I was making my way to Millac, when—when——"

I broke off and glanced meaningly at Adrienne: I wished her to understand that she need never fear indiscretion from me. There was a throbbing pleasure in sharing a secret with her. But I found no responsive gleam in her glance, still full-turned upon me. Rather an increase of abstracted concentration. Though she pondered upon me, I now felt, with a lover's instinct, that her thought was miles away.

M. de Ruffeleu rambled on in congenial reflections. The castle of Langévol held for him but one interest: that of its ownership. The noble Mireléons were its original lords, he informed me. The last, Roger de Mireléon, had been a Knight of the Temple.

"You referred, I think, a moment ago, to Knights Templars. He was the last, I say. The race having become extinct, the Castle fell to the first who could seize and hold it. Yes, yes, you are right. *Routiers* and *Cottereaux* made of it a nest of brigandage. It was my ancestor, sir, Renaud de Ruffeleu, who cleared the country-side of them, before the English wars. Now,"—he moved contemptuous hands—"now the people that claim to own the ruins—ruins, they are scarcely habitable—Giscourt the name is, as I have told you—are the Louvetiers of the province. No, Mr. de Quercy, I do not associate with such people. I have no acquaintance with them." He paused, hesitated; then, looking at me with the air of one making a great concession, "I have no objection, however, to your going over to them from my house—you, a stranger, a traveller with a purpose of learning. No, I have no objection. It can have no consequences. You can conveniently make your investigations from Rozac. A little later, when you are stronger, then——"

Here Adrienne interrupted in clear masterful tones:

"Mr. de Quercy is quite strong enough already. He can ride there to-morrow."

I turned in surprise, and found that her amber gaze had kindled. It was as if her dark thought had opened out in splendour like the wings of a butterfly.

"You can ride, I suppose?"

I stammered, before replying in the affirmative to the abrupt question, for she had altogether puzzled me.

"Of course you do. I could not possibly conceive of a man who did not! Well, tell Cousin Gontran that if you had a mount, nothing would suit you better than to have a look at Langévol. And that, no later than to-morrow!"

Suddenly, in my mind's eye, I saw myself beside her on horseback; we two, racing across the dun moors, with the clouds flying past us overhead, the wind in our faces. . . . The prospect swept me off my mental balance. Fatuously enthusiastic, I cried to the Comte:

"Mademoiselle has sketched a delightful programme! If I ever dared contradict her, it certainly would not be on this score."

"It is all arranged, then," ordered she with the masterfulness which I thought adorable for yet another second or two. "Mr. de Quercy shall have a fitting mount. What a good thing it is," she went on, wheeling upon me, "that you should have been exercising yourself in little walks all these days. You will be quite ready for an hour's ride or two. And it will be fine," she added, scanning the far blue horizon with an air of wisdom which completed my delight.

"You have even the weather at your feet!" I cried imprudently.

She scanned me up and down for a moment, while points of mirth ran like sparks between her eyes and the corners of her mouth.

"Behold, what it is to be a young man with a taste for archæology!" she mocked. "And you are so amiable, Mr. de Quercy, you will be glad to think I am taking your place beside my cousin, there. Oh! he will miss you sadly over the chess-board, I make no doubt, poor

Cousin Gontran; but he will console himself too, thinking how happy you are, burning with inspiration, on the threshold of vaults, and rapt in ecstasy over a turret!"

Monsieur de Ruffeleu looked from one to the other with a slightly bewildered air. The smile which his ward's gay manner had called to his lips faded as he beheld my countenance. I was boiling with rage.

"Mademoiselle," I cried, "I scarcely know which to admire most, your wit, your decisiveness, or the sweetness of your disposition."

"Reserve your admiration, Mr. de Quercy, for Langévol."

She rose and swung away; her hound, with drooped head, following at her heel. And another ten minutes saw me bending over the inevitable game with as good a grace as I might, and striving as usual to conceal my poor old host's blunders from himself.

After supper the seething in my heart and brain crystallized into action, and I found a moment to address Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu out of her cousin's hearing. I plunged without preamble into a well-rehearsed phrase.

"I am, as you say, quite recovered, mademoiselle, and, stupid Briton as I am, able to take a hint like another man. I do not want to seem ungrateful or rude towards my host, yet I cannot but feel it would be best if, from Langévol, I were to proceed straight to Millac to-morrow, and take up my abode there. Perhaps you will undertake to explain to the Comte——"

She stared at me: the most genuine amazement in her eyes. And then, for the first time and the last in all our acquaintance, I saw La Louvecelle blush as heartily as any schoolgirl.

"What a ridiculous idea!—Ah, but no, I do not want you to go. That would not suit me at all! I——" she broke off. "My cousin would be hurt indeed! Good heavens, sir, are all Englishmen as thin-skinned

as you are? Does Albion never indulge in a little pleasantry?"

Perhaps she saw that her protestation, if undoubtedly pleasing, was not likely to be productive, for she again changed her mood. She stretched out her hand and laid it on mine; compelling, yet, after all, a woman's touch—cool and satin smooth. My resolve and my anger went down before it, with humiliating completeness.

"If I have vexed you," she said, "I am sorry. I don't want to know how I can have vexed you, but still I am sorry. To show that you forgive me, speak no more of leaving."

I did not answer in words, but lifted her hand to my lips, unrebuked. I remembered once and again, with a bite at my heart, how she had kissed me. It was not that I had any illusions just then, Heaven knew!

I was a very lovesick, hapless youth and felt myself so, as my great shadowy room engulfed me that evening. I could have wept; yet there was sweetness through it all. . . . Old man as I am now, looking back on it, upon my soul, I think there was almost more sweetness in that foolish thwarted love than if it had been a triumphant conquest.

But the history of my single romance was destined to follow a curious recurrent measure. I see now that it was not because Diana was capricious and deliberately cruel (as I then passionately believed), but merely that I was to her nothing more than a pawn in her own great game of chess. Inevitably, as the wave is flung back into its trough, so surely was I dashed into humiliation and misery at the very moment of hope or comfort.

Hours were early in Castel-Rozac. I must have been in my bed of wild dreams before eleven. I awoke, after what seemed a long sleep, to hear the strokes of twelve drop into the night from the turret clock. Because of a certain oppression that the hangings and

tapestries of the room had produced upon me during my illness; because of the sense of comfort that the sight of the stars and the sunrise gave me when I awoke from my feverish and excited slumbers, I had established a custom of keeping both windows wide open to the air and uncurtained to the sky.

The inevitable end of such a day of autumn stillness is the gathering of the mists. My great chamber was full of mist; it was pressing in through the stone mullions—silver-shot with invisible moonlight. I lay and stared placidly for a second or two; the last note of the midnight hour vibrated and hung dully as if caught in the vapours. Then I saw how the window shaft nearest me became suddenly suffused with an orange glow, and, amazed, I sprang up and looked out. A wing of the castle jutted at right angles from the main body in which my chamber was situated. On the sill of one of its windows a candelabrum of many flames had been placed. I could count five, haloed and magnified by the stagnant mist. I saw the glint of the branching silver, the angle of the open casement and the movement of an indistinct figure behind, without being able to collect my foolish wits sufficiently to find any meaning for this nocturnal illumination. But, even as I marvelled, explanation came; and that in a shape, which, already familiar as I was with it, raised my hair on my head and set my skin pricking. Ululating in circles, it seemed from no particular quarter, the wolf-cry filled the night. The wolf-cry! Nay, the cry of the human wolf, which had followed me through so many waking and sleeping hours since the Louvecelle had crossed the path of my life.

Instantly the candles were blown out: only moonlight dimness held the world. The mist had laid cold fingers upon me; the curious smoke-taste of it was on my tongue. Damp enveloped me like a pall. But the outward chill was nothing to that in which my soul was steeped. I crept back to bed and lay on my back, listening; listening eagerly, for I knew not what. The only sound I heard, save the thousand whispers and

creaks of the old house—and it was one of sinister association to me—was presently the pad of the great wolf-hound and the click of his claws on the flagged passage outside: slow, and measured, past my room, and on.

CHAPTER VII

ROADSIDE INTRODUCTIONS

In most well-balanced natures—without vanity I can claim to have belonged to such a category—the law of reaction is a wholesome one. To my chill of body and morbid distress of mind succeeded warmth. I was in love, true, and no youth in love can claim to be in an altogether normal condition. But even my feelings for the Louvecelle contributed to the wave of indignation which swept through me.

What! was this a being to sway a man's every thought, possess him to his soul? Was such an one to be his first, and last, and only? She who called her lover by midnight signals to secret illicit meetings! And it was not maidenly dignity alone she was here betraying, but the weakness of age, the trust of a noble heart, the hospitality of a protecting roof! I knew enough of my host, by this time, to realize what a wound it was that was thus, unknown to himself, dealt to his honour. Forlorn, mourning old man, stricken by a fate of well-nigh Greek tragedy, I had seen the love of his desolate heart for his young companion. I had had a glimpse of the hopes he built round her. I understood that she was to him the solitary representative of every family tradition, of every yearning, every instinct. And while the old man slept, or wept, or prayed, she lured the adventurer to her through the night, because—it was clear and there could be no other reason—he was such as the Lord of Ruffeleu would not receive by day. . . .

"Out upon you," I cried to myself. "Out upon you, Charles de Quercy, if, with the memory of your mother's

pure eyes still fragrant in your heart, you do not tear this obsession from you, this noxious weed which has entwined itself in every fibre of your being!"

There is no greater comfort for a mind in such torment than to come to a strong and sane renunciation. I went to sleep upon mine as if I had been a child again, and my mother's good-night kiss had been on my forehead. And, for the first time in that house, there were no dreams about my pillow.

When I woke, the sense of relief had curiously increased upon me. I felt like a man returned to health of mind and body. The honey-yellow sunrise of a perfect day suffused a sky of the ineffable tender blue peculiar to autumn. There was a gentle breeze, and it blew in, tart, unearthly pure. Early as it was Louradour made his appearance; hours were primitive at Castel-Rozac, and though my invalid weakness had been indulged, I well knew that the castle was always astir long before the autumn dawn.

The good fellow's countenance reflected the morning radiance.

"Monsieur is awake? That is well! Aha! it is the horn that has startled him from his pillows, I wager."

"The horn?"

"Has his honour not heard it, then? Aha!" The portly Gascon halted with my boots in one hand and a jug of hot water in the other, to hearken smilingly, his head on one side. "Aha! there it is again. The Langévol people are starting after the boars!"

Even as he spoke the breeze rushed in; and faintly, very faintly, upon its wing came a haunting cry of horns, somewhere from the depths of the distant forest.

Louradour hummed in echo: "*Allons, chasseurs, vite en campagne!* . . . The rogue pigs, they are thicker than ever, this year! They destroy as fast as we cultivate."

The *Réveil du chasseur* is a taking air. I listened to the lilt which reached me, joyous and spirited, despite the distance; and the words popularly set to the ancient flourish danced through my brain as if to the measure of a pricking horse.

"Monsieur le Comte," proceeded the major-domo, "sends his compliments to Monsieur de Quercy, and is glad to notice that it promises to be a fine day. It looked, last night, as if the autumn change of weather was coming after all. But, no. What a sun! What a sky! And Maréchal will be at his honour's disposal. It is Mademoiselle who suggested Maréchal. The gentleman has not yet seen Maréchal, I believe. It is the Comte's own horse. Ah, a quiet, well-behaved, well-trained beast, that! Mademoiselle thought he would be the best.—Maréchal, for sure, would not strain the wound."

He paused; and, perhaps perceiving some want of enthusiasm in my expression, broke out in a new strain:

"Nevertheless, do not imagine, sir, that the mount is not worthy of such a gentleman as you. Pure blood. My master would ride no other. And trained; oh, trained to the noblest conduct! A mouth—silk! A heart—fire! Paces——" He bunched his brown fingers and kissed them. "Paces! I say no more! Oh, his honour will enjoy his ride on such a day as this!" He broke off to stare at me, his round face one delighted grin: "Monsieur really looks superb this morning!"

The tantalizing music of the chase, drifting in once more upon us, set my blood aglow. "I do not know about looking superb, but I feel superb," I cried. "Go, thank Monsieur le Comte, and say that I accept the loan of Maréchal gratefully. What was that you were humming? *Titi-tum-tum, vite en campagne?* By the lord, yes, it is quick and away with me too!"

But Louradour had nursed me too devotedly not to have taken unto himself habits of authority.

"Yes," he retorted with decision, "I will tell M. le Comte. But we must not go quite so quick. *Bouffre!* We are very brisk this morning. Very brisk we are! I will first bring in breakfast. M. le docteur said the gentleman was to feed himself, and feed himself well, did he not? After that, if Mr. de Quercy will solemnly promise to avoid over-fatigue, the good horse will be

waiting for him, by the mounting stone, in the court of honour."

Presently, when he returned with his tray, he handed me a letter, remarking pompously:

"Monsieur le Comte has reflected that a note introducing Mr. de Quercy at Langévol will be of use. 'I have not the acquaintance of these persons,' says Monsieur le Comte to me, 'but the rules of etiquette bind me all the more. A guest leaves my house for theirs; it is fitting he should bring a document from myself.' So Monsieur le Comte calls for his great pen and writes a letter to Monsieur le Baron Giscourt. Oh, là! là! It is as if the skies were falling to think of my lord addressing himself to that scum! He has indeed taken a singular attachment to you, sir, that he should bring himself to such a condescension merely to pleasure you! *Peste*, when he handed me the note, I assure your honour he thrust it out at me, holding his breath as if it smelt bad!"

Louradour was wrinkling up his own nose into an odd grimace as he laid the folded sheet in question by my side. Then he burst out laughing; and, dropping the light tone of sarcasm fitting such aristocratic service, exclaimed, in his rich Gascon brogue, roundly:

"And with that, if his honour flatters himself he will get as much as a peep at a stone on the Giscourts' land! . . . The Langévol crew will not care that!" He snapped his fingers. "Not that for him or M. le Comte. You can take my word for it. They are like the wild beasts themselves; they guard their hole."

For the moment I felt I did not care very much: I would have my ride, anyhow. And I had, moreover, all the self-confidence of my years. I took up the letter; and while the man disposed the repast on my table by the window, I read the words of introduction:

"MONSIEUR LE LOUVETIER,

"Permit me to introduce Mr. Charles de Quercy, a young English student, now a guest at Castel-Rozac, who is travelling in our country

for, as I understand, the purpose of historical research. The ruins of Langévol are of especial interest to him, he informs me; and any civility which you feel disposed to show my young friend, any help with which your erudition can assist him, I shall regard as service to myself.

"Believe, Monsieur le Baron, in my well-considered appreciation.

"COMTE DE RUFFELEU."

I read and laughed. My host's attitude towards his rough neighbour had the whole fine flavour of pre-Revolution days, coupled with the acidity of a personal grievance. I agreed with Louradour in so far that I doubted if the introduction would advance me very much in the rival Louvetier's good graces; but I folded it and placed it in my breast pocket with every appearance of gratitude.

Gaily I sat down to my breakfast, the savour of which returns, across all these years, oddly mixed in my memory with the fragrance of the wind rushing in through my high-perched windows, and with the vision of the wondrous colours for ever shifting, deepening and brightening on the cliff-like range of hills to the south, which lay beneath it.

Nowadays that a cup of lightly-drawn Souchong and a few inches of dry toast form my diet of an early morning, I recall the hungry delight of that breakfast at Castel-Rozac with as much amusement as regret. Ah, well!

It was an especially substantial repast, to enable me to face coming fatigues: *omelette aux fines herbes* (not devoid of a soupçon of chives); a tasse of *bouillon double;* the flour-powdered grey bread with its real flavour of wheat, ground in the stone of the river-mill; grapes, a little shrivelled after their fierce ripening, rosy-yellow globes of sunshine imprisoned in honey! And the draught of country wine, light, nutty, straw-coloured, from its glass jug.

Louradour, watching my performance with a quizzical zest, entertained me the while:

"If his honour succeeds in getting into Langévol—which, as he is aware, I do not for a moment believe—he will find it a mighty different place from Castel-Rozac. Faith, yes! As different as Monsieur le Baron Giscourt—*hé, hé*, a famous fellow that!—is from the nobleman whom I have the honour to serve. But, as Monsieur le Comte says to me, 'nowadays, my old one, when one says "Baron," one says everything!' I could make you as good out of Brisco! As good? better, better! It is a dog of race, that! But those folk yonder—no one knows where they came from—from Brittany it is said. We all remember, here in the country-side, the day they descended upon us. People will tell you tales. 'Like a caravan of gipsies,' says one. 'Like the coming of the fair,' says another. The old one and his sons and grandsons. Men, women, little children. Women—if monsieur had seen those faces! Where did it all come from?—as I say. Well! well! It was just before the Revolution, sir, you understand. And at first—his honour may not believe it, but faith of Louradour, it's true—it was in the old caves they went, like wild beasts to their dens. Then, when they were selling the seigneurs' land for an old song the old one—the head of the tribe, you might say—buys you an old farm close by—and then claims the land with the ruins, though we'd like to know who from—it was common land in those days. Anyhow, it all went cheap enough—for nothing, one may say. And it is out of the caves into the house for as many as would fit in. The others stick to their holes. But, caves or house, it was hunting and shooting every day and carousing every night. Poachers and robbers one would have called them. But then, under the Red Cap in France, it was: take what you can! One thing—evil always brings some good use, as monsieur well knows—they killed the wolves! There was war between the beasts, you might say—Ha! ha! The wolves went in packs those days. Even as I tell his honour, they

went in packs through our woods; and the Giscourts after them! Such slaughters and such feasts! All the great gentlemen who hunted were gone—Monsieur le Comte, the first—they were in prison, or guillotined, or ruined; or exiled like us. As for the country-folk, thankful for the riddance of the wolves, they would have made friends with the Giscourts, fast enough. *Ma foi*, yes! So much drink going, so much sport of all kinds going, so much—his honour will understand that I do not further indicate! One would have thought all the rapscallions in the land would have gathered about them. But there's a strange thing. The wolves themselves would as soon admit the hounds. Those brigands, they keep to themselves, the whole lot of them. Monsieur may believe me or not, there is not so much as a girl about the place that is really of this country. And odd stories—*hé! hé!* I'll not vouch for them—but odd stories there are about the fate of busy-bodies. I'll not spoil your appetite by repeating them!"

The old butler paused to change my plate and set the grapes before me, remarking that a twig of fruit was refreshing to the blood of a morning. Then he filled my glass and carefully wiped up a drop that hung on the lip of the jug.

"From one day to another, it seemed, they began to grow rich, these Giscourts. And every year richer. How?" he shrugged his shoulders. "No one knows how. Some say one thing; some another. Secret service—highway robbery—no one knows. You may guess, but that will not tell you. The money is there, right enough, and the great big house at the foot of Langévol is built in the twinkling of an eye; kennels and stables and what not; horses fit for the finest lord in the land, and hounds worthy of a king's chase. Strange! Strange it is, sir. Wait a minute, I have more for you, stranger still: money flowing, in good English gold. Gold, sir. Guineas. At a time when France had nought but paper money, at best silver crowns. Gold! but no one complains of that, aha! To tell the truth, monsieur, no one cares to meddle too

much with the Giscourts. At the beginning, five of them, masters, grown men and their families and servants, a batch of devils! And, by this time—swarms! Grandsons, some ruling, some serving. And every man of them ready to put a bullet into a wolf's head, or a man's, at a hundred paces. And one fine day, the chief of the lot is made a baron—the oldest son of the old man, that is. I'll trouble you; a baron!"

The major-domo of Castel-Rozac had a cackle of supreme contempt.

"If his honour will allow me time to explain"—I may remark that I could not have got a word in edgeways had I wished—"he will seize the whole situation in a moment. The Usurper, sir, become Emperor, had a fancy to have things in the old style, in the grand style. He must appoint his Wolf-Masters. The Wolf-Master for Guyenne, he is found already. It is Giscourt. But a Wolf-Master without a title, that will not do! Quick, a title for my fine fellow! *Dame*, it is simple enough, and no one can deny that they have kept the wolves down. Yes, your honour," proceeded the good servitor, picking an earthenware coffee-pot out of the ashes of my last night's fire, "times have changed since my master was Grand-Louvetier of Guyenne, and Castel-Rozac kept the state becoming his rank and the royalty of his office. Twenty-six *piqueurs* in the white-and-green, with the badge of Ruffeleu and the King's crown on their sleeves! And hounds, of the old Irish breed—there are none such left now but Brisco—the last of his name, so to speak. And he, like my poor master, will die, without an heir! Well, well! Our good King is back, but not the old days, and Monsieur le Comte de Ruffeleu—the poor gentleman—writes to Giscourt! (Two lumps in the cup, monsieur, and a lacing of the Fine-Champagne?) Baron Giscourt retains the post. And, to be just, sir," concluded Louradour, with the common sense in which the French lower class, however Gascon and bombastic, is never deficient, "they kill you the wolves, as well as ever we did, if not better. Listen!" He started in

sudden excitement: "Did I not say it was the boar to-day?"

He dumped my coffee-pot on the table and craned his head out of the window.

"They're off! They're off!"—A new flourish of the horn rose and fell far away. "They're off, the whole pack of them, for the day!"

He turned upon me and lifted a warning finger. "If monsieur takes my advice, he will do nothing so foolish as to attempt to join in the pursuit. Not that Maréchal would not carry him with the best. Oh no, good blood cannot lie. I know what young men are. No! no! Let us be sensible. The further he keeps from those miscreants, the wholesomer it will be for Monsieur. If to Langévol you must go, sir, go there straight, in heaven's name. You will find the old man. That one, the ancestor, he hunts no more. He is stuck at home till the devil comes to fetch him! They'll blow the *Hallalli* over his grave, as they did when young Giraud broke his neck, and the women screaming and tearing their hair like savages, and never a prayer! Oh yes, the old sinner will be at home, safe enough. And that one, he can bite no more, for he has not a tooth in his head. If, as I say, Langévol it must be, you could not have a safer moment. Though, if you'll believe me, sir, you will keep clear of it all."

The Gascon's countenance was a study as he thus harangued me. It was clear that, while he deemed it his duty to warn me from the path of peril, he had a secret desire, nevertheless, that I should enter upon it. His little eyes sparkled as he looked at me sideways. And when he found that I kept my counsel, and gave no further hint of my plans, an open and guileless air of disappointment settled upon him.

Now I do not know whether the lilt of the horns had got into my brain and started all the blood inherited from generations of hunting squires tingling to the momentary eclipse of that sober scholarly fluid inherited from my mother's family; or whether it was the mere

joy of life and health returned after weary illness and convalescence; certain it is I started upon my expedition all through the early morning in so high a state of physical pleasure and lusty energy that I can recall no other moment of my life quite comparable to it.

I found Maréchal all that Louradour proclaimed him to be; and if the hollows over his eyes spoke more clearly of the passage of years than was pleasing to me, there was a fire beneath, an elasticity in the paces that bore me along, which fully testified to the vaunted blood. "He will go with the best," I said to myself, repeating the butler's phrase.

Need I say that the Gascon's farewell injunctions were cast to the winds in my mind, as the sly old boy meant them to be, and that I fully intended to avail myself of any sporting occasion that came my way. . . . The rocks and the caves would always be there, but the sight of a boar-hunt on such a morning!

As Maréchal's gentle trot warmed to a good pace, the sense of adventure and of freedom increased within me to exhilaration. The hauntings, the forlorn ardours and grinding disappointments of Castel-Rozac, I left behind me with the gates of its courtyard.

I was glad to be alone. I was glad with a pure animal gladness as well as a leap of youthful spirits, to be alive at all. So near I had been to the great chasm, before the taste of existence could be as much as discriminated on my tongue, and here was the cup at my lips again, sparkling, bubbling, intoxicating! A full draught! Everything was renewed to me; the whole sunlit world brimming with appeal. Delightful discoveries lurked in every instant. What freshness in the light wind, what forgotten beauty in the cloud-flecked sky! How inviting the unknown stretch of high-road, the path leading it mattered not where! How suggestive of living delights the endless medley of sounds; the rhythm of human activities in the distance, the flutter and call of birds, the rustle and chant of the trees, about me and beyond!

Maréchal's paces Monsieur Louradour had found to

be beyond words of description. My dear uncle, to whom I owe so much of that taste for old and beautiful things which has coloured all my life, had been fond of quoting Shakespeare. He used to stand, I remember, on the porch of Redhall, of a hunting morning, and watch me get into the saddle, desperate proud of my pink and of my stepping chestnut; and he would call after me in his rich clerical voice:

> When I bestride him, I soar, I am a hawk: he trots the air; the earth sings when he touches it!

I quoted the words now to myself, and rolled the glory of the language on my tongue as a precious vintage.

Along the white ribbon of road, between patches of maize, stubble and stony vineyard, Maréchal took me at a perfect gait; with movements, as it were, like balance and motion set to harmony. The suddenly rising ground which blocked the southern horizon, forest-grown and forbidding, brought me to a walking pace. Somewhere in those wooded depths the boar-hunt was proceeding; and towards that unknown wild chase, in wilder company, through brush and blind brake, up crag and down steeps, for ever taunted and led by the beckoning horn, every fibre in my youthful being converged; drawn like iron to the magnet.

I had gaily gone a league or so when I reached the point impressed upon me by Louradour, where the road to Langévol left the highway and turned at right angles to the hillside. I had no longer the barrier of forest in front of me, but the bare crest of the chalk downs cutting the sky. Before I had advanced very far up the slope, which at that point was steep, I saw a horseman ride suddenly into my line of vision and halt at the very point of the ridge. "The Loup-Cervier!" cried I in myself. I scarce know what made me leap to this conclusion; something familiar, perhaps, in the set of the figure, thus once again cut out on a height above me. I halted involuntarily and stared. The rider

seemed to be scanning the country. A second thought rushed into my consciousness with the same unerring sense of fate: "He is waiting for me!"

In England, not so long ago, the episode would have called for caution. The highwayman has never, that I know of, been a French institution—but then, I had come upon strange beings and unknown forces these days. One never can tell. I felt in the pocket of my coat for my trusty Manton, but the next moment was ashamed of my suspicion. The Louvecelle's lover! . . . Adventurer he might be, no doubt was, but a vulgar thief of the road, never.

The Louvecelle's lover, it was he indeed. As Maréchal generously breasted the hill, I became every moment more certain. He sat his horse—a sinewy, vicious-looking roan it was—as if they had been cast together in the same mould. He was clad for the saddle, simply, yet with a smack of elegance that sprang to the eye: grey-clad, like his fair comrade, as I noted with a prick of annoyance. But it was the figure within the clothes; its ease, its strength, its perfect balance; the way in which his lean knees gripped the saddle, the poise of the dark, haughty head, that commanded my unwilling admiration. Motionless, as they waited, save for the roll of the horse's eye and the flare of its nostril, what most struck me was the intense vitality repressed in both rider and steed.

From the gates of Castel-Rozac to the junction of the high-road with the forest by-path—a distance of, I believe, about a league and a quarter—I had traversed my span of perfect enjoyment in this world, so rare is the gift, and so evanescent! Yet, who knows how many can say even as much? I had known the value of each minute as it went by, and tasted deliberately its exquisite flavour. To use the words of the young poet, then already becoming famous, I had been as one—

> whose strenuous tongue
> Could burst joy's grape against his palate fine.

I have often thought since (looking back and

moralizing, in my old man's way) of what slight material happiness is built. Just life itself, it seemed ; just youth itself, and the beauty of the world, had sufficed to give me my meed of earthly paradise. No lover's ecstasy, no triumph of passion, or soul revelation : when deep emotions come into play, too much is at stake, and anguish inevitably lurks too close to the throbbing heart of joy. From the moment that I beheld the Loup-Cervier, planted high upon my path, my hour was over.

When I was so close to him that his every feature was clear to me, he raised his hat and smiled. White teeth flashed in that dark-hued face with an effect well-nigh of radiance ; yet it seemed to me the brightness was a menace, like that of lightning. His hair was black as night, clustered about his head, with close waves that would have been curls but for the shears. His eyes were long, brilliant, with blue whites, and singularly red-brown irises ; and, like his smile, I thought them eloquent of danger in the very blandness with which they fixed themselves upon me. I observed too, that, even as his horse's, his fine nostrils were dilated. An odd fancy, born no doubt of name-suggestion, made me compare him to a wild beast scenting gaily the advance of his prey.

The roan flung up his head and neighed savagely at Maréchal ; and the rider, with scarce a movement, corrected him with heel and whip, sent him spinning on his haunches and brought him round, quivering, to face me again.

"Pray, sir," he cried, with smile accentuated in eye and lip, "can you tell me if this is the way to the Wolf-house—if indeed this interminable way leads anywhere ?"

His voice was harsh, strong, and yet pleasant to the ear, like the wine of the country to the palate. And—this struck me from the very first words—fluently as he spoke the vernacular, it was with an odd, soft twang, a certain slurring of the *r* distinctly exotic. His glance left my face, rested, I thought, with mocking in it, upon the hollows in Maréchal's noble brow ; then came back to me. All with a kind of carelessness that enraged me,

though of course I had to meet courtesy with courtesy. As I restored my hat to my head, I replied :

"I am a stranger myself, sir, but I have been given to understand that this path leads through the forest to Langévol."

"Why, capital!" said he. Again he wheeled his horse out of the way with perfect mastery ; and the movement was equivalent to an invitation for my company alongside. "We are bound for the same direction, sir. Is there any reason why we should not move in company ?"

There was reason enough, in my antagonistic recoil from him. But there was reason too, apart from conventional civility, why I should gulp down distaste and accept the suggestion : for a devouring curiosity rose within me to know more of him who was my rival in such singular secrecy.

A few yards or so we went in silence ; the roan fiercely dancing, under relentless control, and my excellent Maréchal disdainful of his ill-mannered neighbour. Suddenly my companion turned upon me again.

"Am I not right in thinking you are an Englishman, sir ?" And before I had time to answer, he continued : "Am I not right in believing you are Mr. de Quercy ?"

The questions came one upon the other with a quickness that was like feint and thrust in fencing. It is startling to find a wild conjecture verified : I had known he was waiting for me.

"You are right on both counts, sir," I said, rather defiantly ; and then I added, to remove an impression which it would be folly to create, trying to smile as I spoke, "I marvel at the acumen with which you have so promptly come to such a discovery."

The spark which had leaped into his eye gave place to the former indifference.

"Nothing to marvel at, I assure you ! My acumen, as you call it, dear sir, would be shared by any packman in the district. I am a traveller here, even as yourself. I put up at Millac. No place like a sparsely inhabited countryside for talk. There's a deal of talk in the barber's

shop at Millac. The whole town has heard a hundred times, and every visitor has to be told afresh, how a young English nobleman, travelling for pleasure, alone and on foot—all Englishmen, especially noblemen, being mad—is found, half-strangled by wolves, by no less a person than the Comte's own hound: a character, I may say, revered in the neighbourhood. The dying stranger was dragged into shelter, somehow, by this incomparable animal. And a doctor—who has many patients at Millac, please note—summoned in all haste to sew up the holes in his throat. I have no doubt," pursued the Loup-Cervier, in that tone best described by the French word *goguenard*, "that if your stock was not so beautifully folded, sir, I should behold your scars. Well, here you come, a cavalier obviously of the highest quality, along the road that leads from Castel-Rozac; mounted on the Comte de Ruffeleu's own ancient steed; speaking—forgive me, your French is excellent—speaking nevertheless with an English accent; pale, obviously from recent illness; and—no less obviously, let me repeat—not of this country! It hardly requires a superhuman effort of the mind——" He broke off.

"Granted that identification was easy," said I, "yes, complete even to my name——"

He caught my words as if they had been a ball.

"That's the easiest of all. De Quercy! Such an odd name for an Englishman! In nothing are you more discussed by the local Figaro at Millac than in your name, sir, which so singularly connects you with the district."

He met me on every point; and yet I could have retorted upon far more telling counts.—Why was he lying in wait for me? Why did he greet me with a pretence? He, who had been, by his own showing, a visitor three weeks in the country, to want direction! How could he know that Maréchal was the Comte's own horse—since the old man had not ridden for at least a month? What subterranean game of their own were Louvecelle and Loup-Cervier playing? . . .

I might have bested him with some guileless observation about certain wolfish howls, last night, so strangely

close to Castel-Rozac; about the inexplicable lights observable upon its ancient walls. But I have never in life been able even to try and take advantage of a fellow-creature. To my thinking, mankind is broadly divided into those who can and those who cannot. My gentleman on the vicious roan most distinctly belonged to the former category, as indeed I was destined to find out to my cost.

He glanced at me, sideways. There was this peculiarity about his vivid eyes, that at times they had a watchful restlessness, and at times became fixed, concentrated unwinkingly upon their objective.

"You were thinking," said he, "that I am what you might call giving myself away. I ask you the road in one breath, and confess myself a resident hereabout, in the next. What of it, most proper young Englishman? You would say, 'How do you do?' to the being upon whose health you are the most indifferent. The fact is, I'm an inquisitive gregarious fellow. I cannot bear being alone. I like picking up new acquaintance. When I saw you jogging round the corner, I said to myself: 'What the devil is this fellow doing? I must see!'"

I knew it was another lie. And, by the flicker of his gaze which came and went upon me, it was clear that he knew I knew. But he continued:

"And now, having successfully introduced you to myself, I will introduce myself to you. Fabien Montbars, sir, at your service! A follower of no particular pursuit—I should rather say, a follower of anything that may offer sport or amusement. Mr. de Quercy, I am delighted to make your acquaintance."

He turned a look of real pleasantness upon me as he said this. His smile took a sweetness; he was as handsome a man as ever I have seen—I felt that if he chose he could have charmed me, in spite of my disapproval, with his wild grace and gaiety: that sort of "Prince Hal" air that he wore. For indeed, in spite of his more than doubtful proceedings, of his familiarity and high-handed manner, there was an inexplicable yet

undeniable breeding about him. High breeding too. I have said, a Prince Hal: Yes, "Harry of England," tricks and all! A dangerous fellow—a fellow to love or hate, thought I. And I still kept as tight a hold upon my hate as I could.

"If I may venture," I said, "in my turn, Monsieur Montbars, you yourself are not of this country?"

His quick look flashed upon me; and then it became fixed. The tone and expression remained apparently unchanged, and yet I felt that if I began to show any inclination to investigate Monsieur Fabien Montbars' discrepancies, it would not be an easy task.

"Now, upon my word!" cried he. "What an ear you must have! I have picked up the twang, have I? Yet, if you mean that I am not French, you are utterly wrong. I was brought up in the Louisiana—if it interests you—and though that upstart Bonaparte did sell us to the Union, I claim my birthright. French, sir, French to the bone!"

There was a sense of friction in the air. How it might have developed, I know not; but for an outside intervention.

GOVT. GIRLS COLLEGE
SRINAGAR
ACC. NO
LIBRARY

CHAPTER VIII

A COMRADESHIP IN ST. HUBERT

WE had followed the turning of the road and were now facing the forest. The wind blew from that direction: it rushed now, bearing a call of horns upon its wing, this time very clear and distinct. My companion jerked his head upwards:

"Hark! The *Vol-ce-l'est!* We are in luck, Mr. de Quercy. Let us trot on—not too fast! You must reserve your veteran, but he will go, when required. Faith, what a creature it must have been . . . some fifteen years ago! The *Vol-ce-l'est*, it is to say they have found the trail—now—there again. The *lancé!* They are after him. We are in luck, I say! Next to a wolf-drive—and that is the very romance of the chase, a wolf-drive in the snow, with torches, en route for God knows where—no one realizes what such a hunt can mean to a man if he has not been of it. But next to that, the boar for me! Wolf and boar, that is what brings me here, as you may have guessed. I want to make acquaintance with these mighty Nimrods, but they are devilish difficult of access. Well, I am in luck now: the whole pack is drawing this way, and I will back my Muscade against anything on four hoofs. I will join the hunt; and we will strike a comradeship of St. Hubert between us, or they are 'no true hunters.'"

He clapped his horse's neck as he spoke. Extraordinary being, he saw his opportunity for another lie, and slipped it in in the midst of his excitement with a plausibility that would have convinced anyone less privately informed than I was. I knew the kind of chase that brought him to this country. I knew the

lovely quarry for the sake of which he hung about the woods, and crept to the castle walls at midnight. Yet he was now, apparently, all to the sport. There was about him, as I found then and afterwards, such a quality of personal enjoyment, and such a determination to keep himself to the height of his capacity, that it was as if he whipped himself and others to a froth of zest.

"*Tay-aut! Tay-aut!*" he burst out again. "Listen! By the horns of St. Hubert's stag, there are two of them! Ah! the old airs, how I love them! Is not the hunting trump a gallant invention? What a tale it tells, to all and sundry who can hear! Heaven condemn me, the *Bien-Aller* already! The chase has settled down to it! Does not the very tune seem to canter at ease? They will not cease their horning now till the beast is *coiffée* by the dogs; for with your wild boar the more noise you make behind him, the straighter he rolls on, crashing through everything—Mr. de Quercy, easy with the pace! I have no mind to put Muscade in a lather before needs be, if you care so little for your old gentleman's bellows.—It is as I thought," he called suddenly, with a whoop of triumph, "they are coming our way! If the old rogues break in the open, we shall see something!"

I had indeed—stimulated both by my comrade's ardour and the maddening lure of the "tucket-sonances" of the horn, as Shakespeare has it, unconsciously pressed Maréchal to the limit of his long smooth trot, and Monsieur Montbars' horse kept level, with an uneasy irritable fling of his legs. I drew rein, rather ashamed of myself, and looked about.

We had reached the foot of the wooded heights which rose with singular abruptness from the plateau itself. The way was stony under the horses' hoofs. A deep cleft opened before us, cutting the hill in two, or so it seemed, through which the road wound its way between sheer walls, a hundred feet or more, of ragged chalk crowned with brushwood and pine-trees. It was my first view of one of those "canyons" which are such strange features of the valley of the Tarn. Once, no

doubt, this road had been the bed of a torrent. The whole scene looked sinister ; so dark after the sunshine ; so narrow and oppressive after the wide horizons, that I hesitated and almost stopped.

Montbars, with one of those changes of mood to which as I afterwards found, he was subject, broke into a loud laugh ; drove his spurs into Muscade's sides and rushed past me over the rough way at a gallop. The horn panted, urged, raged from the heights; and the sounds, flung down into the gorge, echoed and re-echoed with indescribable, fantastic effect.

It was not likely that I should allow myself to be left behind when such stirrings were afoot. I thought no more of my recent illness than I did of the Comte's horse ; no more of the broken stony track than did Montbars himself. I dashed in pursuit. Indeed I defy any man of twenty-four to form a single consecutive thought with such clamour above and about him, and with the spectacle of his rival's flying horse in front.

All at once my young gentleman brings his brute of a roan to a halt with a force that set him first plunging, then rearing. Had the wise old steed, Maréchal, not swerved of his own accord, we must have cannoned, with heaven knows what result ! I pulled up and looked back ; but objurgation died on my tongue. The Loup-Cervier waved me behind him with a fierce gesture. He was staring upwards. The sun struck between overhanging trees, straight down upon his upturned face ; I noticed its feline concentration. The clamour of horn had become intermingled with confused sounds : whoops and shouts of human voices ; barks and whines of hounds and the savage whimpers of the close pursuit ; the dull beating of hoofs on mossy ground, the crashing of branches.

And, at the very moment when I looked up in my turn, there befell the strangest thing surely ever chronicled in the annals of the chase. Indeed, had I not been eye-witness of the event, I would unhesitatingly have classed it among the more unlikely of hunters' tall tales. Two huge masses came, hurtling down as it

were from the sky, and fell with sickening thuds not ten yards in front of us. The vaunted Muscade reared, snorting in terror; and even Maréchal gave me an instant's difficulty, which, if his own perfect good breeding had not reasserted itself, might very well have been dangerous.

In the bewilderment—and I felt myself well-nigh as dizzy as the green boxer who has had his first knock down—I gathered but confused impressions of what followed: of Loup-Cervier sitting his apocalyptic horse as if he were welded to its back; of his laughter ringing out over the clamour; of the yell of a hound high above me, so piercing in its baffled fury that it went through my head like a gimlet. I remember staring at the two dead boars, in stupefaction; and then up at the gulley, through which they had crashed over the edge of the ravine, to see the bracken and brushwood become alive with the crests and tails of the hounds. And the next picture is of the Loup-Cervier dismounting with a bound, from a quivering, submissive Muscade. I see him slip the reins over his arm, and lift both his hands to curve them round his lips; and every cavern in my memory still echoes to the call which he flung upwards:

"*Hallali! Hallali!*"

On the wooded rocks high over us there was a moment's wavering in the conflicting noises; a pause; almost of silence; then the horn took up the cry, and the *Hallali* seemed to fill both earth and sky till I thought my head would have cracked.

The last of these kaleidoscopic recollections is of how the edges of the gulley became peopled with men on foot and on horseback; and how one of the latter pushed forward along that treacherous slope at imminent peril to himself and his mount; and some risk to ourselves, for the stones began to roll and dropped about us like the first strokes of a giant hailstorm.

He approached near enough to the edge to be able to look over at us; and my Loup-Cervier, one foot upon the largest of the prostrate monsters, shot another

Hallali up to him, in sheer lightness of heart. The rider shouted down something which the reverberation rendered indistinguishable, but which I rather think was peppered with sulphurous oaths. Then there was an immense clatter as he wheeled and forged up the corrie back to his companions. I heard the roar of commands, the howl of beaten hounds; a new cry of the horn. And then, gradually, pandemonium died away in the woods.

The silence, when it came, seemed to add to the bewilderment. Montbars was laughing with an abandoned exultation that might have fitted Pan himself. He led his horse across the road and began to tether the reins to a stump.

"By the name of St. Hubert, patron of hunters, did any ever see the like! Ready-roasted larks falling from heaven are not in it! Two tuskers from the sky—and famous ones!"

He looked at me over his shoulder with an impish grin, and drew—from the back of his collar, of all places!—a long clasp-knife which he opened with a rasping click. The curved blade, of Spanish shape, bright blue and damascened with gold, gave a flash.

"What are you going to do?" cried I, sharply. "The brutes are both as dead as——"

He interrupted me.

"I have got to do my hunting duty. Will you lend a hand?"

The question was nothing but a sneer. I have no doubt I looked as green as I felt. Nausea seized me by the throat. I watched him a moment and then rode on round the jutting rock out of sight, dismounted, and sat down. I knew I was behaving like no sportsman; that I was a squeamish weakling in the eyes of my rival. And indeed I was glad of the refreshment afforded me by a little bubbling stream that trickled and leaped down the rocky parapet.

As I sat I heard my Nimrod whistling sweetly over his task. Presently he strode back round the turn of the road, wiping his knife with a bunch of grass. He

closed it, and thrust it back into its odd hiding place as he approached.

"A nice companion to go hunting with!" he exclaimed, jeering, but not ill-naturedly, at the disfavour with which I regarded him. "You would let that splendid quarry go to waste in your refinement. Do you not know that if you don't *gralloch* your wild hog——" he broke off. "No matter, I have no sympathy with your delicacy, but I will spare it! Meanwhile, I have rendered that Langévol rabble a service for which they will be grateful. A stroke of fortune," he added, sitting down on a boulder near me and clasping his knees. "It will be as good an introduction as I need. By the way, I propose to await our friends here. And you, I take it, may as well wait with me, since you meant to visit them."

He glanced at me; and a sudden air of pleasant comradeship chased the mockery from his face. There was something deliberate in the geniality with which he now addressed me:

"Take a nip of this," he exclaimed, thrusting his hand into his breast-pocket and drawing out a battered silver flask. "It is as good Jamaica rum as ever warmed the cockles of man's heart. It will bring the blood into your cheeks again. Nay—never wince at that! A mere trick of the stomach. I've known a certain caballero, the hero of a hundred daring adventures, who couldn't shave himself. Gunpowder he didn't mind. Death, no terror. He could have walked up to a cannon's mouth; but the sight of a drop of blood, in the glass—and he was done for." Montbars had produced a cigar case and was making his selection: "Try one, to pass the time—*un puro de la Habana!* That is an advantage I have retained from my outlandish connection: a constant supply of good cigars.—No? you do not smoke.—But you will allow me!" Dexterously he struck flint sparks on his slow match, inhaled his first puff, and looked at me in smiling enjoyment of the fragrance.

The cordial within and the cordial without worked

in me a swift revulsion. The man, with a deliberate purpose, yet as mysterious as had been his first way-laying of me, set himself out to be agreeable. In ten minutes he had broken down and brushed away all the barriers of dislike and reprobation erected against him in my consciousness. He was excellent company, a vivid, if rather capricious talker; but he had the still rarer gift of stimulating talk in others. Before long I found myself very open with him. He listened with quick interest to my antiquarian lore about the cliff-castles of the district and my discoveries concerning the Gilles Maschefer tradition. Indeed, now and again he pressed me with questions so keen and persistent that I might have thought he was playing with my studious enthusiasm, but for the unforced eagerness of his glance and voice.

The man's laugh was infectious. His smile—well, I somehow came to watch for it, for the pleasure of seeing it flash in his dark face. On a mere word of mine he would toss me a whole picture of vivid experience, fantastic, humorous. . . .

Half an hour or so had we been together thus, he knitting the while my young impressionability to himself with a masterful and artistic command of sympathy, when suddenly he broke off in the middle of a phrase and clapped me on the shoulder.

"Hark, lad—here they are!"

The touch of his hand was pleasant; and the sense of accepted comradeship it implied, flattering.

"Sit still," he said, as instinctively I was about to rise. "These are the kind of folk that mistake politeness for servility."

The rest of that morning remains in my mind still as a pageant of colour, sound, and movement.

With a jingle and clatter as of a squadron on the march, a cavalcade bore down upon us, headed by a huge man on a powerful bay. The horsemen talked in shouts to each other as they bustled along till once more the whole cliff road resounded. A dozen, or more, of

them there must have been. Except for him who took the advance, it was difficult to distinguish master from huntsmen. They rode, all equally unkempt, all clad in much the same green-and-white uniform and velvet cap, soiled with grease and blood.

Louradour had warned me that they were of one race; yet the first sight of them was startling like a tiresome dream. Deep-lined brown faces, square jaws, small cunning pale-hued eyes: it was the same countenance that met one on every side; the same down to the tufts of bushy whisker on the high cheek-bones, varying only from the rusty grey of the Grand Louvetier himself, through black and tawny, to the carrots of the lusty youth at the end of the troop.

"*Ohè là*, you sirs. Good-morrow to you!" cried he of the grey hair, as he rode up. But his advance had brought him to the bend of the road: the quarry lay before him and drew his eye. He pulled up, crying exultantly: "Both! Here's a tall tale! Devil have me, both! Aha!" He paused; became cognisant of Montbars' handiwork, and looked back at us; a rollicking smile spread over his harsh countenance. "That's right! A proper hunter, one of you! A fellow who knows his business." He was shaken by a subterranean chuckle. "And a throat, a throat as good as a trump. *Hallali!*" His attention shifted from us back to the carcases. "Did anyone ever see such a pair of *gaillards?* Clean work. Which of you, now, which of you?"

He scanned my face a second with his small eyes, at once fierce and sly. Then, passing over me, his gaze rested on my companion, and approval wrote itself in twisted grimace:

"That is the lad, I'll wager my pipe."

Montbars made a little gesture of the hand to his head. I stared at him with surprise. No doubt, given my languor and pallor and his full-charged virility, there must already have been strong contrast between us; but never so more than now. He looked the most impudent yet friendly dog of a fellow it was possible to

imagine. An indescribable swagger had come into his whole attitude from the swing of his crossed leg to the cock of his hat.

The Baron de Giscourt, for it was no less a personage, gave a hoarse laugh which was echoed by his mob behind—and a more boisterous crew I have never met in all my life.

"That's right! That's good!" he cried. "A good office, a famous bit of service, upon my word! Neither I nor my lads will forget it, sir! To have lost the chase and the meat together, that would have been filthy luck! We owe him a good turn, eh lads?"

Again he was echoed, deep throated.

"I like to see a thing through," said Montbars, nonchalantly. "There is no more than that in it."

"Possibly, sir, possibly," rejoined the master. His formidable row of yellow teeth were still displayed in a grin, but I saw, marvelling at my companion's knowledge of human nature, that the Louvetier—a bully—was distinctly impressed.

Montbars rose, stretched himself and moved indifferently towards his horse.

"I say—whither bound?" exclaimed the Baron in something of a fluster. "You're the kind one must see more of, my young fellow.—Don't you think so, boys?"

Three of the horsemen rode out of the rowdy group and revealed themselves thus evidently the sons of the house of Giscourt.

"Whither?" repeated Montbars over his shoulder as he nimbly got into the saddle. "I'll be gralloched, sir, like our friends, the tuskers yonder, if I ever was able to give a straight answer to a question like that. I go where the mood takes me. A little while ago——" He was gathering up his reins as he spoke, and with the faintest pressure of the knees produced the most convincing caracoles. "A little while ago," he slightly raised his voice, "I allowed myself to be persuaded by my friend there to accompany him to Langévol." He gave a smile of consummate drollery at my round eyes. "But, upon my soul, now that I've met you gentlemen—

I have the honour to speak to the Baron Giscourt, have I not?—now that I've met you and been fortunate enough to render you a little service, the spirit seems to move me in another direction. Unless indeed," again he smiled at me, "my friend should make a special point of my company——"

The four stared at him, jaws dropping. He had them as well in hand in three minutes as his own dancing, tugging Muscade.

"The gentleman yonder," said Montbars, with a lordly gesture towards me, "is bound on a visit to the Wolf-house, and——"

"Why, then, thunder!" interrupted the Wolf-Master—here we were, indeed, amid this gentry, a long way from the polished courtesies of Castel-Rozac—he slapped his thigh, gave a jerk of the head in my direction, "we carry you both along.—Both, I say!" he roared, as if to bear down a flicker of denial still perceptible in Montbars' smile. "Both, I say, since you run in pairs, like our pigs there! Aha! I don't let you go. *Parbleu*, no, I don't! I know a man when I see him, and it is not Giscourt way to go owing grudge or favour. I'll pay you, lad; I'll pay you in cheer and cup. Faith, it is as if the Good Devil himself had spat you out of the pit to help us! There we stood on the crest, cursing our luck—and *Hallali*, sing you, down in the gulf! But for you—*Crénom!* We'll have a few bottles of the Jurançon bin over this! And it is not every one I'd bring under my roof, much less give him the sucking of our old Jurançon!—And now, the company, since we are ready, we'll take by the shortest towards the haunch and the glass. *En route.* Half-an-hour's trot and we are there."

The invitation to myself had been of the most perfunctory; and though I had mounted Maréchal when Montbars bestrode his Muscade, I should, I think, have hesitated to proceed further, had not the old Baron beckoned me up, whistling as he did so: I might have been my brilliant friend's dog!

In this breezy manner we were carried away, leaving

some *piqueurs* and the younger members of the hunting party to bring the quarry home in their own time.

We rode three by three: Montbars and I on either side of the master, the sons close in rear—for all the world like an escort. Loud talk, lusty jokes, blatant glorifications of the morning's work passed right and left, back and front.

In one of the rare pauses of the noise, I tried to establish my claim as a person of some importance. Pulling out the Count's letter, I endeavoured to effect the formal introduction; but the Baron waved back the sheet. He had turned to me with impatience, and caught the words from my lips with a rough, good humour.

"What's that? Nonsense, lad. Put it up, put it up. I want no scratch from that doddering old fellow of Rozac. Here is a man, a proper *chasseur*, to vouch for you. You are the friend of our friend here—that is the introduction for me!"

Montbars, whose very name was still unknown to them, was already the friend; and I was accepted by the crew on his mere word and nod!

We emerged from the chasm into the open country once more; far ahead, partly cut out of the white rock, partly rising against the sky, stood the ruins of Langévol. As we drew nearer, a great rambling house sprang into sight under the cliff. It seemed a kind of village set in that wildness.

The straggling figures of horsemen and a mass of perpetually varying shape moving along the road in front of us, showed *piqueurs* and hounds returning to kennel. Now and again a gust of wind would bring the yelp of a dog caught by the lash. Suddenly there burst behind us a blaring fanfare which violently disturbed the equanimity of Muscade and even agitated Maréchal. The three sons had swung their horns over their shoulder to their lips and trumpeted in unison. Like the skirl of the pipes, so romantic on the hillside, so excruciating behind one's chair in some highland hall, the blast was ear piercing.

I must have started and winced, for I heard the horn-blowers shout in schoolboy glee ; and Montbars, regardless of the vagaries of his plunging roan, leant forward on his saddle and cried to me across the Baron's bulky figure :

"That, Mr. de Quercy, is only the *Dampierre*—home-coming."

He was doing the honours of the savage company. He was already one of them !

The call produced an immediate stir in the seemingly deserted place in front of us. We could see the great wooden gates being thrown open ; huntsmen and hounds hustled in before us with shouts and oaths and all the clamours of a homing pack. Several men had dismounted and stood already in their shirt sleeves, waiting to receive our horses, by the time we entered. The whole place was alive with children of every age ; barefooted, in vivid rags for the most part ; with little faces tanned to copper hue and shy or bold eyes. And it seemed to me that every window held a bunch of women's heads, one above the other : old and young, handsome and hard-favoured ; yet each with the indescribable stamp of a wild race apart.

But the Wolf-Master kept order in his den. A shout, a circular fleer of the whip ; a single gesture to the casements, and a fantastic disappearance ensued. He flung a conquering look from Montbars to myself ; then dismounted heavily.

"Welcome to the Louveterie, sir — you master *Hallali*—aha ! And you too, sir. And hark you, you scamps, see to the gentlemen's horses, and that in style, do you hear !"

He waved his hand towards the door :

"My house, sirs. You are welcome."

But he stood blocking the threshold, and bellowed orders to his sons :

"Here, you, Jannic and Valentin, show our guests what kind of a place we have here. And you, Thibaut, to the cellar : the brown seal ; and thirteen to the dozen, no mistake ! I go and fetch the old one."

The Louvetier—it was a strange rough figure to hold such a royal office—wheeled, strode away down an echoing passage; while Montbars and I found ourselves in the clutches of the two sons, who seemed, if possible, to have improved upon the paternal pattern of brute joviality. We were not spared one detail. The stables, where thirty mounts at least, of every kind of breed, but all, to my experienced eye, of the best, short of thoroughbred, were carefully if rudely tended. Further on, the kennels for the different kinds of *meutes*: for wolf, boar, and other game. On every door, and under the eaves, were nailed trophies of the chase: wolves' heads and crossed claws, by the dozen; chaplets of boars' tusks, outspread foxes' skins, and crucified birds of prey. A permeating charnel smell filled the air. I was tired, my head ached. I felt sickened. Montbars, however, poked his nose into every corner; and, apparently, with deep interest.

My wonder, I remember, ran vaguely around the great wealth upon which these Nimrods of Rouergue—sprung so obviously from ruffian stock—must draw to maintain the expenditure of such an establishment. Some similar speculation may possibly have passed through Loup-Cervier's head; for he fell, once and again, into a musing abstraction, which, however, he deliberately shook off.

For the rest, my own thoughts were mostly engrossed by the tall silent ruins of mediæval days towering, high upon the bluff-side, above the bustle and trivialities of the modern house. I began to fear that, caught in the whirl of this rowdy company, I might well be debarred from my projected quiet ramble among the old stones. I yearned for it as a paradise of peace, and thought with dismay of the revels to which I knew myself condemned.

At length we were conducted to the house itself and ushered into a long room, low-raftered, with rude plastered walls on one side and a row of uncurtained, barrack-like windows on the other. The only furniture, with the exception of a high-backed armchair by the fireplace, consisted of a massive refectory table, some

twenty feet long; a couple of oaken benches, and a dozen or so of heavy stools—for all the world like the "coffin-stools" still found in our English villages. A couple of gun-racks hung on each side of the fireplace, and the wooden floor was sanded.

A phenomenal boar's head—a veritable megatherium of wild pigs—flanked by two equally monstrous wolf masks, cunningly stuffed, glared and grinned from the plaster hood of the chimney. They seemed to play the part of canting heraldry in this latter-day baron's manor. The only colour in the place came from the deep hearth and the gleam of the brass horns which, one after the other, the hunters unslung from their shoulders and hung upon a row of hooks, together with their hunting-knives.

Two strapping young women, garbed with some pretension in short blue woollen gowns, with bright kerchiefs close-bunched round raven hair, each clashed a dish upon the table as we entered. A copious meal was already spread: cold joints and fowls and pasties, yard-long loaves.

The two girls straightened themselves, and, nudging each other, surveyed the strangers with intense curiosity. One who seemed the elder and more forward, who had the blackest hair and the most inviting glance, apparently found my companion straightaway to her liking. She placed her hand on her hip, swung herself with the movement of a Spanish dancer, and cast him a long ogle. The other stared at me. She had a softer face and copper tips to her dark curls. She looked as if she pitied me—I dare say I was pretty green. A push from one of the younger Giscourts sent both damsels out of the room. No doubt about it, the male reigned at Langévol in right elementary fashion!

That son of the house who had been designated as Thibaut now stumped in upon us and began to align his generous dozen of flagons in well-ordered battle front. He surveyed them a moment, in high satisfaction; then produced a cork-screw with a significant grin in our direction. Montbars, on whom nothing was lost, sent back a smile of complete approval.

The fourth cork or so had given its sob as it parted its long company with the crusted bottle neck, when a door at the chimney end of the room opened, and the Baron reappeared, ushering in, with a certain clumsy deference, the "old one."

This latter proved to be a man to all appearances well past the psalmist's allotted time-limit, and though in the full grip of years, one who yet kept an air of what must have once been herculean strength. A wrinkled skin, a beard of dingy white, limp locks around a dome of head, yellow as old bone, could not destroy the marked likeness to his family. The eyes looked out in their cavernous setting, under shaggy bushes of grey eyebrow, with the same indescribable pale fierce glance which characterized sons and grandsons. The same blue eye it had been, faded now to a sort of uncanny opal. Yet the mind behind struck one as of a vastly different quality to that which had been granted the progeny.

A sudden odd conviction seized me that here, in the furred robe, dwelt the ruling spirit of the brood: the soul, as it were, of that gross outrageous body.

CHAPTER IX

THE PATRIARCH OF LANGÉVOL

HE shuffled in on slippered feet, clad in a loose garment lined with some savage fur: wrapped round his lean form it reached below his ankles. He held himself upright—one who had been a "stark man," whom death would find still stark.

Halting, he peered at us—Montbars and myself—with a glance as of a sword blade through mist, a most acute intelligence striving against the dimness of age. Then, helping himself with a stout stick, he went slowly to the chair by the hearth, and sat down.

The Baron, with his engaging freedom of manner, crooked his finger at us, beckoning and whistling under his breath. Montbars gave a little laugh in his throat and stepped briskly up.

"This is the lad, father!" shouted the Wolf-Master. "A lad after your own heart!"

"Eh, eh! Good-day to you, young sir, good day!"

The old man's voice had that goat-like pitch which comes in their eld to those who have been especially loud-lunged in youth. But, toothless as he was, he spoke with unexpected distinctness:

"Your name, sir—I did not catch it—but a gentleman who has obliged my sons, it suffices! A comrade, a sportsman, *hé-hé!* I have heard! Two boars, no less—*Hallali*, and, on the spot, your knife handy! A bit of luck. A bit of luck, indeed! There'll be pasties for supper. I am partial, sir, to boar's head."

"We'll have it minced for you, old one!" cried the

son, and clapped his sire on the shoulder. He glanced at us. "He has no teeth, the old one."

"I have no teeth, sirs," repeated the ancestor. He caught my eye with his odd gaze. I felt my blood run cold beneath it. How can I best describe it? His was like the horrible sightless orb of a blind man—with a diabolic power of vision! He shook his head at me, as in self-pity.

"But you can drink, old one."

"Aye, aye, I can drink!" The ancient frame was shaken with laughter. "I can drink, with the best!"

"That he can," cried his family in chorus. They had gathered about his chair and turned countenances of beaming admiration upon him.

"He could drink us all down still——"

"He can go a bottle better than any of us."

"You'll see him under the table to-night——!"

"And not a whit the worse in the morning!"

"The better, the better!" quavered the old man.

He caught my eye again, and this time nodded at me. I swear I have never seen a glance so full of acuteness and vitality in a countenance so old.

"You must be hungry, sirs! To the table with you. I've had my pap. I'll sit by the hearth. I can't eat with you, gentlemen, but I'll drink, I'll drink."

He spoke slowly, his eyes the while turning from me to Montbars and back again. I am certain that his thoughts were at work and that he was playing to us all —his sons as well as his guests. Montbars sought my eye with a swift look. The Baron Giscourt made a stride to the table, seized a dust-covered bottle with one hand, and with the other clutched three tumblers, pinching them between his fingers as you may see a tapster in a hurry do at a road-side inn. One of those he thrust upon his father, the others upon us. Then, after jerking a splash of wine upon the floor—a traditional performance perhaps as old as the classic libation to the gods—he filled each tumbler to the brim, and over, with the ruby-red. All the grandsons, armed in their turn with full beakers, gathered round their ancestor's chair, waiting

with unmistakable respect till he should give the signal.

He lifted the beaker. I thought it marvel the skeleton hand should grip so close and hold so steady. Montbars, with his positively unrighteous cunning, leaped to the ritual and clinked his glass with the old man's; when, all following suit, there ensued such a cluster and tinkle of goblets that no stage carouse ever showed the like. The whole proceeding was carried out in solemn silence. The only sound in the great room was a gurgling and gulping; followed, in noisy chorus, by sighs of satisfaction. The draught drained, every one, except myself, turned his glass upside down, received the last crimson drop upon his thumb-nail, and jerked it off with a fillip.

I was not acquainted, then, with the ceremonial of *rubis sur l'ongle*—the popular Gallic equivalent of our own "no heel-taps"; but Montbars was evidently quite familiar with it. Indeed, his well-shaped and trim finger was the first to receive and pitch away the "ruby."

The glass might be coarse; but the liquor was worthy of any jewel goblet. It raced like the classic ichor through the veins. Never had I before, nor have I perhaps since, tasted the life of wine as in that first glass of Jurançon. The old man straightened himself. I do not want to seem fantastic, but I certainly thought that the fire of the grape flared red in his eyes.

"Fall to, boys!" he cried; and there was a sound of manhood again in his quaver. "Look after the friends. Eat now; gossip later."

He sat very erect, watching, smiling; while his toothless jaws worked, as if in ironic anticipation of our efforts. His descendants noisily drew their stools to the board and attacked the piled-up victuals with a will.

The carving and pushing of plates had, however, hardly begun, when the outer door was violently thrown open, and a man rushed in upon the company, breathlessly excited and streaming with perspiration. Though he was dressed in ordinary woodman's clothes, I saw by the white-and-green band on his arm that he

belonged to the Wolf-house. As he came, he screamed, between exultation and terror:

"Bertrand! Monsieur le Baron—Bertrand, gentlemen all!"

He was echoed by a shout. With the exception of us two guests and the old man, who merely raised himself with both hands on the arms of his chair, all in the room leaped to their feet. The name "Bertrand!" rang from every throat in amazement and glee. The Wolf-Master advanced, putting his progeny on one side with a powerful gesture, and assumed command of the situation.

"Bertrand again! *Crénom!* You have lifted Bertrand's track? Are you sure? Where?"

"I have marked him down—oh! it's himself—no fear—the same as ever—perhaps whiter! Down at the *Combes aux Anglais*—I am sure of it! He was quite the last one I was thinking of—I was setting the limes. Only for the crack of a twig, I would never have known! Oh! it was he, sure enough. He was sneaking through the clearing, not twenty yards off, looking round and grinning at me—the old brigand—the old devil! I lost sight of him. But I thought of the Rocking Stone—I ran and climbed just in time to pick him out again, away in the hollow—making for the *Combes aux Anglais*. You will start him there, by going round!"

An indescribable confusion had now seized upon the company. Knives and forks were flung down with a clatter. Bumpers were poured out and tossed off standing, while the most excited and jubilant comment ran from lip to lip.—"Bertrand!"—"Bertrand back again!"—"Aha, *mon gaillard*, this time we shall see!"—Oaths and threats, most gory and blasphemous, were intermingled with loud laughter. I thought of a jovial set of demons getting ready for an unexpected haul. Whoever the old brigand might be, there was a hot time preparing for Bertrand!

While the whole business was as inexplicable as the wildest dream to me, my Captain of the Highway did not fail either to apprehend the occasion or to make use

of it. He rapped out as round an oath as any, between two mouthfuls of pasty; drained a second bumper of wine, and jumped up:

"I'll have you know, friends, that I'm with you in this. *Ah! parbleu, j'en suis, moi!*"

No one paused to answer him; I really think that he had, as I said, already so contrived to become one of them that his presence was accepted as a matter of course.

There was a rush to the doors: a stampede that would have done credit to a herd of buffaloes. And then, all at once, as if a hurricane wind had blown the whole company away, silence and emptiness fell in the great room. The old man and myself were alone together. No one had thought of me. As for him, he sat, the smile wide on his lips; only quick movements of the opalescent eyes showing that there was life—aye, and an intense spirit on the watch—in that still figure.

Outside, the commotion that had fled from us rushed in for a while in full swing from yard and stables. Shouting of orders, drumming and scrambling of hoofs on cobble stones, baying and whimpering of hounds. Then a sequence of sounds more concentrated and ordered: the filing out of many horsemen, the break from walking pace to slow trot, and then the swift yet gradual fading away of this rhythm. I listened vaguely for a call of the horns, but there was not a whisper of them.

The hush that had fallen within encompassed us at last from without. The house of Langévol seemed folded in stillness; only from some distant corner came the crying of a child.

Wonder buffeted me. What was this trail that had drawn them from the first taste of the feast in such unanimous enthusiasm? Could it really be, in actual form, a man hunt? And this Bertrand, the brigand, the *gaillard*, as they called him, some desperate human creature to be dogged and ridden down, and slain like wolf or boar? I had a reeling headache. I could follow no thought consecutively, but nothing seemed too strange or too reckless to take place in these surroundings.

Through my tired brain the words *Combes aux Anglais* kept repeating themselves, as an echo, after four centuries, of the English voices that once so loudly rang over these lands.

The sand cracked under shuffling feet ; a low chuckle sounded in my ear. I started to find "the old one" close to me.

"*Hé, hé*, young man, a pity you have allowed yourself to be left! You're not like to see such a chase in a lifetime."

I got up.

"A chase?" I stammered. "And what kind of a chase, sir?"

If I had been tempted for one moment to look upon the father of the Wolf-Master as in any way approaching the senility which is the sad heritage of his years, the glance he now fixed upon me would swiftly have dispelled the thought. It went through me like a gimlet. I felt in it a cruelty that would have torn my heart out if it could. The next moment it was deliberately veiled, as you may see an eagle hood its eye with film.

"My son did not tell me he had brought an Englishman," he said.

There was a horrid distinctness in the words issuing from his toothless jaws that matched the horrid perspicacity of his milky eyes. I felt, most absurdly, as if my nationality were somehow a breach of good faith ; and, anxious to display my credentials, hurriedly drew the letter of introduction from my breast.

"My host of Castel-Rozac, the Comte de Ruffe-leu——" I began.

He interrupted me, stretching out his claw-like hand:

"Aha! Blows the wind from that quarter?" he mumbled, as if to himself. "Give, sir, give! I can read."

I thought it was a gibe, but a glance at his face with its inward fixed look disabused me. Reading was evidently an accomplishment which all in this house did not possess. Indeed, it was an accomplishment which

the patriarch himself exercised with some difficulty, poring over the sheet. He looked up from it at last and unhooded his eyes upon me.

"Mr. de Quercy—that is no name for an Englishman. This is the very edge of the Querci. But I'll have you know, sir, whatever you may think, no one can touch our right to these estates—no matter who you may be, or pretend to be."

The blood mounted to my forehead; I thought I had to do with a madman. Yet I felt myself insulted.

"I pretend to nothing, sir. My name is my own, and I have no thought or interest in these regions save what is connected with the study of archæology."

He was listening so attentively that I believed I was making an impression. I continued more easily:

"All I ask is permission to wander in your ruins. I may say I know something about them already. Therefore——"

He interrupted me so sharply that his old quavering voice broke.

"Indeed! How is that?"

I felt such enmity strike out at me from him that I answered it more than the words themselves, saying hurriedly:

"I am a student of history. Has not Monsieur de Ruffeleu made that clear? The ruins of Langévol are celebrated. Nevertheless, if I am infringing upon any special privacy, if you have any reason for objecting to the presence of strangers——"

Again he interrupted me, this time with an air of eagerness and conciliation that struck me as unpleasantly as his hostility.

"Reason, sir? Privacy? By no means, by no means! Nothing of the kind. I am an old man, sir, you must excuse me if I make mistakes. An old man is slow of wit. I had not understood. I am honoured to make your acquaintance."

He lifted his hand to his forehead; it was the peasant salute.

"My sons and I, sir," he quavered, "are always very

glad to show friendliness. Very glad indeed. Your companion, now, is off with the hunt. *Hé, hé*, such a hunt, I say, as a man may never see again. And you are free of my ruins. A young gentleman so quiet and fond of study, and another young gentleman so keen on the sport! Langévol has luck indeed—both on the same day! We do not see many people, sir: it is all the more honouring. Both of you the same day. One, one way, the other, the other! A little strange, a little bewildering to an old man, but very honouring, very honouring! We're simple folk, sir, always ready to oblige. I trust you will find sufficient to entertain you in the stones yonder; and that your friend, who's such a gallant sportsman, sir, may be in to see old Bertrand's head cut off."

"Head cut off!" I cried; "but who is Bertrand, then?"

"You must indeed be a stranger!" There was a cold sneer on his parchment face, though the tone remained obsequious. "Ha, sir, are you a guest in these parts and not yet have heard of Bertrand?"

My patience gave way. An Englishman is not accustomed to find his word doubted at every turn.

"I assure you," I said, "that I have not the vaguest notion whether Bertrand be man or beast, fellow-creature, or wild boar, or wolf."

He chuckled, still sneering.

"You like your joke, young man, but I thought we should come to it. Man or wolf? I wager, sir, your friend does not share your innocence, and that he had a very good notion when he trotted off with the lads there that he was after old Bertrand—old Bertrand, who has fooled us for twenty years—old Bertrand with his tricks and his secrets; whom even my son, mark you, sir, my son and his sons, have been after five times already and never succeeded in rounding up—any more than one can round up the devil. . . . Lead, even, cannot get at him! That is why we call him Bertrand—our country name for the Great Devil. Twenty years ago he was black, a rare colour. Black as the Devil

himself. . . . Eh, the boys could tell you the runs he has led them . . . before giving them the slip. For after every chase, as all these old wolves will, he leaves the country, goes right away. But this one comes back every four or five years—as if for fun! Now he is white, they say. I'll warrant a deeper devil than ever! The boys won't get him—you cannot force an old wolf, let alone Bertrand—but they will have a rare time. . . . Brave lads!"

The old man's garrulity seemed to be carrying him temporarily away into a kind of senile enthusiasm. But he quickly came back to his former tone, and went on acutely, bringing his suspicious glance once more upon me:

"A pity your friend did not explain matters to you. You would not have remained away from such a chase—such a chase, sir, that even I, old as I am, would have made shift to join, only that I am weak in the hams—weak in the hams!"

"I am an invalid, Monsieur Giscourt, and I know nothing of your kind of venery. We have none of it in England. And besides, sir, I ride a horse not my own. I could not in decency risk its limbs, not to speak of my neck, in a pursuit I do not understand."

He gave a little cackle. My resentment seemed to amuse him.

"Reasons enough, young man!" he exclaimed. "You're a sharp fellow, I see, but has nobody ever told you one excuse is as good as twenty? There, there—the matter's clear. The ruin is quarry enough for you, and you're welcome to pursue it. I've no objection in life, sir, no objection, as I've told you. The road is open to you, round yonder." He turned to the window, pointing with his yellow hand. "Before you come to the kennels, there is a path to the left, the most convenient way, look you, up the cliffs."

He stood a moment longer as if communing with himself; then fixed me with his odious eye, and made the rustic gesture of salute.

"You'll excuse me, young gentleman. You have

your business, I have mine. We had better both see to it. Finish your repast, sir, if I may advise ; you will find it heavy going in the rocks."

He went to the door, dragging his feet. The weakness he spoke of was very evident. He was talking to himself. I saw him nod, and shake his head. When he reached the threshold, he paused and turned round. I thought horribly of a malevolent baby as he smiled his toothless smile :

"Let me advise you : do not try to explore further than daylight reaches—keep in the daylight, if you ever wish to see it again."

The door closed, and I was alone. I will not deny that my first impulse was towards instant departure. The old man's smile remained in my consciousness as the expression of all the evil I felt vaguely about me. What was to prevent me from walking out to the stables, mounting Maréchal, and taking the road back to Castel-Rozac ? I thought of that sad, haunted, dignified place as a very haven of refuge. But something there was to hinder me, stronger than prudence or the sense of my invalid weakness. It was the thought of the Louvecelle's mocking smile ; of the Loup-Cervier's scornful laugh. Whatever Langévol and its ruins, the Wolf-house and its menace, still held for me, I would so bear myself that the lovers should not laugh at me together.

The old man had counselled me to eat, but the smell of the viands sickened me. Nevertheless, I felt that he was right and I must restore my strength.

I sat down in my place again, filled up the beaker, and cut a piece from the long bread in front of me. I ate my crust and drank ; and once again the wine ran life into my veins. But this was my second bumper of the morning, and it was a slow cordial as well as an immediate stimulant. For a few minutes I felt as if a glory of intelligence woke, many-coloured, in my brain.

"To-day," said I, "I will place the first stone of my future fame!"

Presently this richness of exaltation changed into

an all-encompassing soothing, equally rich. Heavens! how comfortable I was! . . . The next stage was oblivion.

I slept long; not so profoundly, however, but that the first step upon the sanded floor roused me. Incomparable that old Jurançon must have been, for, in spite of two such noble draughts, invalid as I was, I woke refreshed, without my headache.

Carrying trays, the girls whom I had previously seen came into the room. The bolder of the two looked at me with a kind of dark contempt, tossing her head. The other had doubt in her gaze. Neither spoke.

"Pray," said I, "do not let me be in your way. I am this moment about to leave the room; Monsieur Giscourt has given me permission to visit the ruins."

My words fell upon silence. But as I took my hat and picked up my redingote from the floor, she of the copper-edged curls brushed by me. I caught a glimpse of her face turned upon me with widening eyes and I believe, a paling cheek; and I saw her lips mouth the single word: "Beware!"

CHAPTER X

BERTRAND, THE WHITE WOLF

THESE strange old cliff-castles of central France have of late years been the subject of much study. Our antiquarians are well acquainted with their story, which is a long one, taking us back to Troglodytic times. But when I was a student of twenty-four little or nothing was known of them, hence the eagerness of my young ambition. I was among the first in the field. But it must not be imagined that after the varied excitements, the many emotions I had experienced, words of sinister warning still echoing in my ears, I could turn that day, with cool judgment, to investigation and critical research.

Nevertheless, when, having emerged from the revolting atmosphere of the Wolf-house, the sense of solitude and freedom had restored the balance of my mind, it was the pure romance of the place that seized hold of me.

The ancient stronghold, with its mysterious caves deep in the heart of the hill, haunted by legend as well as by history, broke upon my sight, after the ugly surroundings of the new-raised Louveterie, a picture of a grand and poetic loveliness.

> Time
> Has mouldered into beauty many a tower
> Which, when it frowned with all its battlements,
> Was only terrible. . . .

The lines sang within my mind as I dreamily made my way, along the scarce-distinguishable track, between the dwarf trees and berry-laden shrubs that sprang from every available crack in the limestone.

I did mark, of course, how gradually Nature's primeval rock had been carved and shaped by man into a cunning architecture. I took stock of covered ways and watching-posts; of natural fissures improved into loopholes; of sally-ports and stairways. I surmised how astutely they had been contrived to lead into inner courts and thence to chambered vaults; thence again, no doubt, to those endless caverns extending far under the hill, into which a small army could, if hard-pressed, take refuge and disappear from all human ken—as, indeed, Maschefer's bands had been known to do. And, as I neared the crest, I did recognize how the carved hill had yielded its white stone to the sturdy Keep crowning it, that it might further menace the sky. This Keep in its audacious and defiant days, had been unassailable, since no royal train of artillery had ever been brought to these distant ways. Now it was crumbling. Centuries of neglect; centuries of scorching summer suns, of winter rains and windstorms; and no doubt a score or more of thunder-bolts, had worked their will upon it.

But what took possession of my mind was the poetry of the world about me: the serenity of the blue, the dreamy silence, the wild solitude. These walls which, in the fighting, plundering ages, had been of necessity kept sternly bare, with every approach free to the view and jealously watched, were now masked by rank growths, clothed with every clinging plant that seeks undisturbed shelter. They were draped with living mantles of colour, from the dark green of ivy and dwarf pine, to the reds of wild vine, the greys and russets of absinth, camomile, hyssop, balm, and a hundred other herbs aromatic on the autumn airs.

On the heights I paused to gaze at the wide horizons. To the north this hill of Langévol slopes gently down to the plains. There, the ground that once was barren and clear to the bowman's eye lies covered with straggling, thin, irregularly growing woods. From the platform of the Keep, which I presently reached at some peril, the view stretched as far as that other and

smaller rise where I saw, faintly limned against the blue, the pointed roofs of Castel-Rozac.

I gazed long and dreamily. Gazed with a new-discovered sense of affection. . . . Yonder, no doubt, on the terrace sat my kindly host of the shadowed eyes . . . and beside him that strange creature, La Louvecelle. No inducement for her to go wandering to-day upon the desert crags, Brisco at her heel! . . . The wolf-cry would not ring through the thickets of their secret meeting-place. Had she not sent her lover to waylay me . . . and was he not, even now, lustily scampering in pursuit of the fantastic Bertrand? . . .

As if in answer to my thought, somewhere far away in the valley rose the call of the horn. I felt an almost delicious melancholy steal over me. Was ever English lad in so picturesque a situation? . . . Down there, the furious chase was rushing to its triumph. They, that had started in stealthy silence, were now proclaiming themselves hot on the trail of the savage quarry. Yet the cry from the woods echoed plaintively in my heart like a farewell from my own youth to its unattainable love.

The call drew nearer; the hunt seemed to be retracing its way. I forgot to be love-lorn and gently tragic. The notes that came like panting breaths up to me awoke a stir of excitement in my blood. I wished I were down among them. "Such a hunt," the old one had said, "as a man will never see again."

Then the music ceased; so unexpectedly, indeed, that it was startling. I scanned the yellowing woods that lay stippled so far beneath me, and strove in vain to fix the spot where the last act of this drama of the chase was being played. A gunshot cracked. Then another. My heart beat quicker: I strained my ear for the first blare of the *Hallali*. But, to my amazement, a new silence settled upon the valley. I grew tired of listening to it. "They thought they had him, and they've let him go," said I to myself, disgustedly. It was as the ancestor had foretold: "They'll not force him. Let them not think it. No one ever forced an old wolf." I went back to the things of my Castle.

Manifold were the interests about me. No one who has not taken up the pursuit knows how enthralling such a task may become. To an eager curiosity are vouchsafed thrills of discovery; and the spice of adventure and personal danger is not absent. For a vivid imagination, it is like turning over the pages of some illuminated manuscript and re-living the lost life, the old struggles and battles long ago.

Straight below where I now stood I had already noticed how the Keep ran down into the rock and the rock into a deep natural ravine. This had evidently been utilised as a strong defensive position against the northern slopes; for, midway on the Castle side, a broad ledge advanced, facing the lip of the chasm with the remains of parapeted wall. Here, I felt sure, some entrance must exist into the caves. I determined to investigate.

In my old man's reveries I often find an odd amusement in tracing back, through my own life and that of others, the trivial incident which has been the starting point for some great change. It is as if the map of my existence lay spread before me, and I were to mark upon it the little bush or stone which first made me deviate from the allotted path. Heavens! into what forests of tangles, to what hills and valleys, may not one idle step lead the pilgrim!

On that day, for instance, had I decided to explore the other side of the Keep—an advanced post had already attracted my attention to the left—how different might not my own life have been, as well as that of many others! Little indeed did Loup-Cervier guess, tearing through the forest paths on his wild Muscade . . . or Adrienne de Ruffeleu, at this moment, very likely, shifting in weariness pawn or rook from one square to another, with impatient spirit all abroad . . . that their joint existence hung upon the mere freak of a student's fancy!

I made my way without too much difficulty to the

parapet in question. And I found it to be, as I had surmised, what, in terms of ancient fortification, was called a *fausse-braye*. Here were the remains of a strongly built low postern. The entrance, overhung with brambles, was closed. I had first feared it might have been built up, but as I looked nearer I discovered a less formidable barrier. The old slab which blocked it was, to judge by certain faint remains of armorial charges, nothing less than a derelict tombstone. I promised myself that with the leverage of a stout sapling I might contrive to shift it. Presently all my attention was claimed by a carving in relief visible on the rocky wall immediately above the lintel: rudely fashioned and much battered, nevertheless distinctly discernible, the mediæval image of an angel on the wing. I acclaimed the rebus allusion to the name Langévol—the flight of the angel—a presentment obviously connected with some forgotten tradition. This undeniable discovery filled me with all the complacency of the budding archæologist.

I had begun a sketch of it in my notebook, when a furious burst of hornblowing in fairly close proximity brought me back abruptly to present circumstances. I turned and hastily climbed a heap of fallen boulders, that I might see what was toward across the ravine. As I swung myself up an inexplicable noise began to intermingle with, then supersede, the passionate horn; a series of sharp explosions like swift pistol-shots, or the crackling of an advancing fire. I found safe standing; and even as I wheeled about, the explanation rushed into my vision.

Dodging in and out under the sparse trees, at tearing pace, appeared what at first looked like an enormous pale-hued hound. But for the colour I could have sworn this was my old antagonist Brisco—so high was the beast on its legs, so fiercely powerful its action. Close behind him, hatless and dishevelled—riding with bent, crouching grip like a Red Indian, galloped Montbars. As he came he plied what I could distinguish as a long-thonged whip—plied it with the persistence of a

frenzied jockey in the last lap of a race, and with reports like that of a pistol.

The incredible situation became clear. He was "forcing" Bertrand with a vengeance—the old devil who had defied two generations of hunters—driving him before him with the most unerring determination. Even as I looked, I saw the huge brute make a desperate effort to break from the line: the thong lashed him without mercy back to the course.

They hurtled up the slope, as if propelled from a catapult. I could hear the horrid rasp of the wolf's panting breath; the bucketting and squeak of Montbars' saddle; the snort of his maddened horse. I could see the sweat black on the roan's chest, and the rider's teeth savagely white in his dark face; on the wolf's flank the bloody stripes of the scourge. All at once a dreadful realization flashed upon me.—The ravine lay hidden from Montbars' view by the lie of the ground, and he was making straight for it!

I flung up both my arms, and tried to shout a warning; but my weakened throat refused service. As in a nightmare, I could only bring out the ghost of a cry. Then, still as in a nightmare, rose an unaccountable fantastic sound close by me—the raucous bleat of a goat. Old Giscourt had appeared on the platform! Yes, I knew it was he, though I felt rather than saw him: all my soul was fixed upon the impending catastrophe.

The wolf suddenly flung up his great muzzle and swerved: he had scented the danger ahead. But Montbars again wielded the ferocious thong, and, with a raging howl, Bertrand made a dash for the chasm.

I heard the pursuer laugh in triumph. And laughter echoed up from the parapet.

"*Hé—hé—hé*—! Eh! The sporting stranger and Bertrand! Young devil and old devil! Another second, my smart lad—and *bonsoir* to you also . . .!"

The old one stood, with both hands resting on his crutch-stick, looking before him with his toothless smile —by Heaven, an amused, a delighted grin! He had

not seen me. He was all intent on the coming crash.

"Eh—*hé—hé—hé!*"

But suddenly the fiendish cackle changed to a gasp of terror. The unbelievable had happened. At one bound the wolf had cleared the chasm and stood on three legs, trembling with the strain, a pace in front of the old man, savagely fixing him with eyes as red as its outstretched tongue.

Then—my blood still runs cold at the memory—I beheld Muscade gather himself for the impossible. He leaped and rose at me, as it were; his front hoofs actually reached the opposite ledge. For one breathless moment he seemed to cling. I saw his head tossed up, an etching of agony, close beneath me. There was an avalanche of stone and rock and earth, as if the whole place were crumbling about us. Then rang out that most appalling sound: the death-scream of a horse. There was a sickening thud. I covered my face with my hands.

I can never describe with what relief I heard Montbars' voice uplifted. No death cry, but a good round oath. I looked quickly and looked again, and could hardly believe the evidence of my senses. I saw the man rolling on the parapet; he picked himself up like a cat. By what miracle of nimbleness he had disengaged himself from the saddle and swung upon the ledge, I shall never understand: there he was—unhurt!

He glanced about him; and, furiously, again the imprecation broke from his lips—too sulphurous for record. Nowhere, surely, but on board a pirate ship could it have been originally heard.

Like the patriarch Giscourt, he never seemed to think of looking up. He was staring at the postern. Here it was that I recalled the old man's predicament; and, with a return of the nightmare horror, discovered that both he and the wolf had disappeared. I was about to hail my comrade, when, snatching at the back of his neck, he too disappeared. I heard the click of his opening knife.

They could have gone but by one way. I jumped down. I knew I should find the postern open: and open it was, or at least partially so. The tombstone, pivoting on its centre line by some ingenious device, now stood edgeways in the aperture. Here, through the narrow gap, must old Giscourt have fled, with the monster after him—too swiftly after him for his enfeebled hands to be able to close the barrier. I had a mental picture of the old wretch, in panic-stricken flight along black passages; with the heavy padding pursuit, the snapping jaws, the hot breath, ever nearer behind him.

I paused involuntarily at the entrance, bracing myself to hear the yell of agony, the savage snarl. But all was strange silence. Then I remembered that Montbars too was within; still bent, I knew, on the devil chase, on cornering the rogue wolf; fighting to a finish in some black recess . . . alone, with all the odds against him! Icy cold seized me. I felt my hair prick.

I do not know if there was any real quailing of the spirit. I trust there is that in me, as in every honest Englishman, which would not leave a fellow-creature in peril even at the risk of his own life. But this, I am certain of: had I wanted to play the faint-heart I could not. Does a great love give us, unknown to ourselves, the power of protecting the beloved? Or was it only that in my subconscious self I was determined to hold my ground; determined that, although doomed to be unsuccessful in life, I would not let my rival beat me in death? However it may be, I saw the Louvecelle's face suddenly painted on the gloom of the cavern before me; saw her eyes flame, her lip curl with burning scorn upon the question: "Did you leave my lover to fight that black fight alone?" . . . No, that question should never be asked of me!

I slipped through the aperture . . . "Keep in the daylight, if you ever wish to see it again!" I thought it very likely, as I went, that the old ruffian had spoken truer than he guessed; that I should never return to behold the sun again.

The blackness before me was impenetrable. I went

along feeling the way. The passage seemed to me narrow and irregular: anon level, anon rising by abrupt ledges. I could hardly have gone many steps before an obstacle tripped me up, and headlong I fell. I will not attempt to depict the horror with which my groping hand came into contact with a bearded face and a bald pate. Old Giscourt—unconscious, if not dead! It was the chill of death, I thought, that met my fingers.

I struggled to my feet, and on with a leap. My head came in contact with the low roof. I heeded neither the pain nor the stagger of the blow, for, suddenly, just in front of me I was aware of a human voice and the snarl of a wolf—sounds of mortal struggle: they were reverberating down the cavernous gallery. I ran towards them, with what speed I could muster amid such darkness, over ground that rose sharply under my feet. At a turn of the passages, however, a guiding gleam shone out, and a few more paces brought me in sight of an open doorway.

It is inconceivable how accurately the lightning details of events will print themselves on the mind at moments of exceptional stress. I remember as if it were yesterday the vision of that cave room—wide and lofty, bright as day: its floor, walls and vaulted roof of white limestone reflected from every quarter the light of a powerful lamp. I remember how, in one dazzled glance, Loup-Cervier's peril became stamped on my brain, and how in one instant my every energy swung concentrating upon his deliverance.

Not a second to lose! Montbars, with his back against the wall, had the wolf by the throat with his left hand. The beast stood, raised upon a leap, towering above the man, one paw on his chest, the other hanging loose—broken or hurt. Even as I emerged from the outer blackness, Montbars lifted his right arm, and there was the blue flash of his knife. But, by a sudden savage twist the wolf baulked the thrust—the steel, missing the heart, was driven into the shaggy shoulder, where it stuck fast, quivering. Montbars was weaponless! A howl of rage and agony circled round the

cavern. I saw my friend's right hand swiftly join his left in a grip that just—and only just—arrested the thrust of the menacing jaws. But I knew that no human strength could strangle such an one as Bertrand —or even keep him at bay.

It seems almost incredible, even in the bewildering succession of emotions, that I should, up to that moment, have forgotten the pistols in my pockets. A single shot might have disposed of Bertrand the Devil from my high perch by the parapet. It now appeared an age before I could extricate one from its place. Montbars was being forced down upon his knee; and the snapping fangs were again almost at his face ere I had the cock raised and the muzzle at the wolf's ear. To this day I remember the scaring thought: "A misfire of the flint, and this, Loup-Cervier, is our last day!"

Blessings on you, Manton, in Soho Square! The red flashed out of pan and barrel. The explosion beat on our ears, hurled back from every stone corner. Slowly, for Montbars' hands still held him as if riveted round his bristling neck, the monster sank upon the chalk floor, his head shattered.—Bertrand the Devil had been forced at last!

Montbars rose quickly to his feet: he was very pale, but smiling. He passed his hand across his forehead; and then, with a careless gesture, extended it to me. That was the only thanks he vouchsafed. I confess I responded with some emotion. Emotion, on his side, there was none. He began to gaze about him with curiosity: his swagger was admirable, but I vow it was overdone.

"Droll kind of hole, this," said he, "in which to run down a wolf. Aladdin's cave—lamp and all—no less."

But, even as he spoke, his smile became fixed; his brow grew black as thunder.

"The old man, Montbars," cried I. "I think he is lying there—dead perhaps!"

"The old man?" I could not guess why he should turn so angrily upon me. But this was no time for expostulation. I lifted the lamp from its socket.

"We must see to him," I urged. But he snatched it back from my grasp.

"Let him lie," he cried, "the old thief!" He held up the light, looking piercingly from side to side, while odd snaps of furious laughter shook him.

The cavern, indeed, was strangely fitted up: a kind of workshop, it was evident; for what purpose I could not imagine. Here a carpenter's bench with an array of bright tools; there a machine like a printing press; others of smaller size defied comparison.

A stone table, hard against the wall, immediately under where the lamp had hung, bore several sets of weighing scales of different character. Ranged upon a shelf stood a number of earthenware vessels, and some phials filled with amber or bright green liquors.

I noticed all these details the more succinctly because of the fierce scrutiny which Montbars turned upon them one after another.

He suddenly placed the lamp on the table, and, with a sharp ejaculation, caught up from the pan of one of the scales five or six smooth yellow discs. They looked like counters to me; but he, after weighing them in his hand rang one on the edge of the stone. Casting the rest from him he drew himself up with a jerk, and shouted:

"*Canario!* . . ."

I did not know, then, the force of that Spanish oath; but it was as if the storm gathering upon him had broken into thunder and lightning. His eyes were fixed full upon me; but I knew he did not see me. Lost in some wrathful thought, he had forgotten everything—the life-and-death strife of a moment before, the bleeding quarry in the corner, the old man's body in the passage. But this latter I had not forgotten. Again I made an attempt to recall him to the duties of humanity.

He paid me but the attention sufficient for a second flash of anger:

"I have something else to think of!"

He took up the lamp again. At the further end of the cavern a massive door barred the way. He marched

upon this, and I followed. The bolt gave under his hand; a second great chamber lay before us. Montbars, raising the lamp aloft, stared grimly about him. It seemed to me, once more, that without in the least understanding, I was yet seeing through his eyes. . . . Opposite us, that flight of steps, and that gaping hole, led further into the bowels of the rock. . . . It was nothing less than a smelting stove, fitted with a full-sized blacksmith's bellows that was built into yonder right wall beneath a hooded chimney; and, half emerging therefrom, that conical vessel of plumbago—unmistakably a crucible. . . . I believe I saw the great iron-bound chests at the exact moment that Montbars first beheld them; and that, with him, I mentally handled the different mallets, chisels and files that filled a certain box beside the broad anvil.

I ventured on no question as he strode across the floor towards this last; set down his lamp upon it; drew from his breast a compass and became absorbed in a computation of the bearings of the room. At last, having apparently come to some conclusion, he re-pocketed the instrument, repossessed himself of the lamp, and returned to the inner chamber.

The sight of the dead wolf seemed to bring back a consciousness of my presence. The careless smile flashed again on his face. He made a gesture towards the table and its shining load.

"The old villain!" he said. "The wily, cunning old *sacripant!*—Well, we have seen a good deal that is not meant for every one's eye!" He slipped the lamp back into its socket, and wheeled upon me. "Indeed, we have seen, I rather take it, a deal more than is quite good for our health. Aye, and the sooner we get out of this, and under the free skies, the wiser. Devilish secret place, the old man's den! No," he added reflectively, "they would not stick at a trifle."

"What do you make of it?" I asked. And even as I spoke, the meaning of the yellow pile and of all the paraphernalia leaped upon me. "Coiners!" I cried.

He gave me a dark glance; and said impatiently:

"Come!" and led the way to the door. But here he halted.

"Yes," he said, as if answering himself, "the wolf. Yes, the wolf must be brought away. You help with the hind quarters. Out with him!"

He wrenched the knife from the body; wiped its blade on the shaggy hair, closed it with a snap and thrust it back into its old place. Between us we lifted the burden and staggered with it into the passage. There he paused again.

"Shut the door, if you can, behind you," he commanded.

Obediently I pushed the panel back with my foot; we heard it close with a click.

"Good, so far!" came Montbars' voice through the darkness. "Come!"

At the bend of the passage a faint blue ray, filtering along the walls, showed that the outer opening was still free—a fact which appeared greatly to relieve my companion's anxiety. He gave a whistle of satisfaction. Some paces further on we came upon the body of old Giscourt, prone at full length, face downwards. Montbars stopped, but only for an instant.

"Let us get out, and have a look round first," he decided.

We squeezed past into the open air at last, and dropped our bristling dingy quarry upon the ledge. A few hounds were sniffing and whimpering, wandering to and fro on the other side of the ravine. And one of the Wolf-Master's sons, dismounted, with the bridle upon his arm, was bending cautiously over the edge, scanning the depth with a puzzled air. On our appearance he looked up, and shouted in wild surprise.

CHAPTER XI

A DIPLOMATIC RETREAT

PROMPTLY Montbars hailed the man across the chasm.

"Yes, here he is, the old rogue! Behold him. But at the cost of my poor Muscade! Down there!"

He made a dramatic gesture towards the ravine.

"What a country this Querci of yours! Upon my word, I had as soon hunt through an earthquake! But we have encompassed the Devil, as you see! Who shall say now one cannot force an old wolf? . . . Forced he was. But only just in time!" Montbars rattled on, with what struck me as an assumed air of exultation, as the hunter's eyes reverted with their amazed look to the open stone door—"only just in time to stop him from adding your revered ancient to the list of his murders!"

The young Giscourt gave a lamentable cry:

"Our grandfather—where?"

"Just in there," Montbars jerked his thumb over his shoulder: yes, in that kind of tomb. Bad, I fear. We will bring him out to the fresh air in a moment. But send some one to show us the way round."

The hunter gloomily measured the width of the gap. Then, without another word, he sprang on his horse and cantered off.

"Now," said my friend, turning to me, with a kind of grim briskness, "I think we are safe for a few minutes at least. Let us extract the ancient."

When we had stretched the unconscious body upon the platform, no wound or any other trace of violence could be found on it. Montbars placed his hand over the heart.

"He is not dead. . . . Odd," he said, suspiciously; "the revered one did not seem the sort of customer that could swoon from mere fright!"

And here, to my amazement, Montbars broke into fluent English:

"Very queer!—I'll tell you what, Mr. de Quercy, we are—no use denying it—in a so-so position, just now, very so-so indeed! We must use our wits, if we are to win safely out of this place. Something of a trap, when you come to look at it." Then, noticing my astonishment, he went on, with his smile, which, even then was captivating: "It is just possible that our old gentleman here is foxing. Not very likely perhaps—he looks pretty blue about the gills—but still just possible. That is why we'll quit French for the present, while we consult."

He spoke with wonderful glibness, though with a strange accent—compound of French and of soft nasal Southern intonations.

"Listen," he went on, "the door of the—what shall I call it?—the peculiar room, is locked, you know. We have seen nothing beyond the passage, remember that. We know of nothing but the passage. We simply followed the wolf into that dark hole, and killed him. That is our little tale, for the moment—understand? This is essential if we are to get clear of this without ructions. There the matter will end, for to-day—unless the venerable here has been shamming, as I said, and is only waiting the arrival of his progeny to tell his little tale. In that case," said Montbars, drily, "it is within the bounds of possibility that, after the brief fight that we should put up—you have your other pistol, I suppose, and I have my snicker—we may begin on this very day the long, long sleep, at the bottom of that ditch, by the side of my poor Muscade! And none of our friends ever likely to be the wiser! Hunting fall, you know. And climbing accident—what more plausible? To begin with, I am not now in such good odour with the gang as I was when we started. To save their quarry for them, is one thing; to hunt it for them is another.

A set of pounding ignorant rascals! They'd have let their Bertrand get away—he was getting away. By the Lord, I could not stand it!—Ah, *Madre de Dios!* when one has seen the right kind of thing in the *prairie*, this European sport seems like a school-treat. Yes, by the Lord," he repeated triumphantly, "Muscade, my poor Muscade, I told you so, would beat anything on four hoofs —and they had winded the pick of their stables after their boars—so we beat them, easy, he and I. We bested them, and that gentry can't stand being bested. Oh, I was all right for them, a jolly-well-met kind of fellow, with a quick knife and a knowledge of venerie: but when I showed myself their master——" He whistled and laughed. "That old villain, the huntsman, it was not my fault if he had a crack in the eye—he wouldn't give up his whip, the surly brute! And I must have it. And now to find me landed at the very door of their *cache!* Oh, they'd do for me what I did for their pigs, if they had me in some quiet corner! But I'd do it again, though, I'd do it again! It was a glorious run."

He broke off. The exultation passed from his face, with one of his startlingly swift changes of mood.

"To business," said he. "We'll get away, right enough."

He bent and placed two fingers on the bone-coloured forehead!

"He's as cold as fish."

"You said, just now," I ruminated, "there the matter will end, for the day. Why only for to-day?"

"Why?" he looked up at me with a shade of contemptuous surprise. "Because, my friend, the most we can expect is to be well on our way home before they piece out the business. Don't you realize that the red traces this Bertrand"—he gave the wolf a petulant kick—"pesky beast, though he did give me the run of my life; the red traces he has left on the floor yonder, let alone the smell of your powder which will stick to the close vault, must tell their story, sooner or later? They hold us now in the palm of their hand, and no mistake

about that. But, once away——" he whistled musically. "Ah, here they come—and, thanks be, not from inside. That would have been the very deuce, if you think of it!"

As he spoke, the Baron, his sons and grandsons appeared, rapidly descending upon the platform by the path I had myself taken. They gathered about us—and there was no mistaking the passionate anxiety with which they gazed upon the old man; nor the angry suspicion of the looks they turned upon us.

"Here, you, sir," cried the Wolf-Master, trying to stare me out of countenance with his odd, light-coloured Giscourt eyes, "what is the meaning of all this?"

Montbars, though he had his glib tale ready, flung a quick glance of intelligence at me; folded his arms and drew back a step. I saw that, albeit with some misgiving, he deemed it wiser to let me speak.

"Why, M. le Baron," said I—and I believe that, with my own complete innocence behind me, I presented no unconvincing figure—"the meaning of your worthy father's condition is that he has but narrowly escaped falling a victim to yonder wolf; to old Bertrand, as you called him, who has, as you see, paid the penalty. Had it not been for M. Montbars," I continued, and upon my word I cannot explain what prompted me to conceal my own share in the affair, unless it was the domination of that strange fellow's stronger will, "had it not been for M. Montbars, who followed unhesitatingly into the darkness of that cave yonder and rescued your revered relative—well, I hardly like to contemplate what would have happened!"

As I finished, I glanced at my comrade; he gave me a scarcely perceptible sign of approval. The eyes of the whole company, even those of the two sons who were kneeling, each chafing a hand of the still unconscious patriarch, were here turned full upon him whose prowess I was vaunting. But gratitude did not illuminate their countenances. If anything, the sombre menace had deepened. Loup-Cervier met this concentrated

scrutiny with a slow, scornful smile; but he neither moved nor spoke.

"You were," I went on, "full of thanks, a little while ago, to M. Montbars, for accomplishing hunter's duty on your wild pigs. What do you not owe him for his superhuman courage and resourcefulness in saving the head of your house? Do you know that his horse is at the bottom of that ravine, and that he himself very nearly shared its fate?"

"That is true!" said the youngest of the grandsons hoarsely. "I told you so. I saw it myself—yes, he lies down there, as squashed as a fly. As for——"

"Give me the brandy flask again," interrupted his father: "I felt Grandad's hand twitch."

The Baron went to the edge of the parapet and stared heavily over. Then he looked back at Montbars, and shook his great head. His wits, none of the quickest, were obviously at work round a situation that both puzzled and enraged him. He went to the postern, shifted the turning tombstone and—my heart leaped—for a moment seemed to hesitate upon the thought of going in. But a shout arrested him. He clapped the slab to; and having seen it securely closed, hurried back to his sire's side.

Montbars and I heaved a simultaneous sigh of relief.

"Grandfather is reviving! He is coming to himself!" exclaimed the Giscourts in chorus.

The patriarch feebly spluttered, and then—from where I stood I could see his face—licked up the remaining drops of brandy from his lips. A tinge of colour returned to his cheek. He blinked and muttered.

"*Aïe, aïe, sacredié*, my knee—my sacred gouty knee! . . . *ouais, là*—what in hell has happened? Ah, yes, the wolf . . . *le sacré nom de loup blanc!* God, my knee! I fell on the knee-bone, boys!—my sacred gouty knobs! *Aïe*,—gently, you devils!"

Two of the old man's grandsons, and Montbars—who, with his incomparable audacity, had sprung forward, all solicitude—raised him between them and began,

with infinite precautions, to carry him up the path. There would have been something comic in the scene: but that the sweat was breaking on the bald head, and that there could be no manner of doubt that the old sinner was in agony. I have since learned, from dire experience, what torture even a slight knock upon a gouty joint can inflict, and have understood how the sheer pain of such a fall upon the rocky floor might have knocked the senses out of a strong man.

The whimpers and bleats, the curses and injunctions, echoed back to us and continued after the procession had disappeared from sight.

I deemed it prudent to remain on the platform with the Baron, his third son, and the indiscriminable mixture of grandsons. Some of these, at a sign from the Louvetier, dragged the wolf's stiffening carcase forward, and, with the most moody intentness, he examined the wound. No word was spoken; and when at last he straightened himself, it was again by gesture only that he directed the youths to carry what remained of Bertrand up the slope before him. He stood back then, and motioned me to pass along the narrow way between himself and the mortuary procession. It was obvious he meant to keep his eye upon me.

We easily caught up the bearers of the old man; and, to the tune of his groans, we all entered the courtyard together.

I have often thought it was a scene too absurd for any farce; too wild for any drama. Little wonder that, accustomed though they must have been to sanguinary and unlikely adventures, the place should be filled with the outcries of the huntsmen who ran from every door to meet us.

Montbars, peremptorily arrested by Giscourt, allowed his place to be taken by the last of the Wolf-Master's sons, and gave me a comprehensive wink as he did so. Nevertheless it was with the most imposing air of dignified courtesy that he turned to the Louvetier. I had seen him hail-fellow-well-met, cordial, dashing, and theatrically swaggering: I had now to learn that he

could command the "great manner" as well as old Ruffeleu himself.

"I regret, M. le Baron," he said, "that the day should not have ended as pleasantly as it began. I have lost a favourite horse, and Monsieur your excellent father, who, one would have thought, should have been in his armchair, rather than standing in that break-neck gorge of yours——"

"My father stands where he pleases, on his land."

The interruption came roughly; but Montbars was not to be discomposed.

"Well, at any rate, if I have lost my poor Muscade, I have had the good fortune to save your parent's life; for, believe me, that dark hole of yours might well have been his tomb."

"There would have been no need to save any one," retorted the Baron in increasingly offensive tones, "but for your fancy way of wolf-hunting——"

An answering insolence leaped into Montbars' eyes.

"Oho—sits the wind in that quarter?" cried he, tauntingly: then seemed to bethink himself—although I am convinced the whole business was the most consummate acting. "I am sure," said he (and it was the air of Hal come into his kingdom, with a vengeance), "that you are too good a sportsman, M. le Louvetier, to grudge another such a piece of hunting luck as mine to-day. I have forced the celebrated, the legendary Bertrand! But for my fancy way, as you are pleased to call it, he would have led you, devil knows where, Languedoc most like—and given you the go-by in the end. Mine was the hand to force him. If it vexes you, I cannot regret it—more especially as it has, by a side issue, meant the saving of a life so precious and venerable."

He paused. The Wolf-Master evidently found himself at a disadvantage. Then Montbars resumed with an increase of haughty courteousness:

"You will permit me to take my leave. I shall have to return to Millac on foot, and no doubt my friend

there will keep me company as far as the parting of our ways."

"Oh—your friend——" the Baron's smouldering choler broke out again. He rolled upon me a threatening glance. "Now that's a queer business. What was he doing upon the ledge?"

Montbars gave a little angry laugh and a nod at me, as though to say, "Best hold your tongue."

"Not knowing exactly, I cannot tell," he replied suavely. "Admiring the view, may be. Is there perchance any rule at Langévol against that? Is the ledge over the ravine such consecrated ground?"

The thrust told. There was some cringing in the bluster with which the Wolf-Master repudiated the suggestion. And pursuing his advantage, Loup-Cervier said, with his air of gaiety and his fine pointedness of utterance:

"High time the English gentleman should be on his homeward way—or we shall have the whole of Castel-Rozac in hue-and-cry through the country-side."

Once again he had scored; and, this time, conclusively. The Baron drew back within the porch, as you may see a surly dog before the menace of a stone. Montbars now carried through his farewell with a high hand:

"We are detaining you, sir. You must be anxious to find yourself beside Monsieur your father's couch. I shall do myself the honour to call and inquire after his health, no later than to-morrow.—We wish you good-day, gentlemen,—with thanks for our most admirable entertainment."

He bowed profoundly and turned on his heel. I followed suit on both counts, with as convincing an ease as I could muster. Together we began to make our way towards the stables. If the Wolf-Master and his family had cherished any secret desire to keep us in their power, they did not dare to execute it. I felt in the marrow of my bones, as I walked away, how they watched us across the courtyard. Yet, as earlier in cordial admiration, now in a kind of fear, Montbars' spell still held them. Kennelmen, huntsmen, and grooms were

gathered in excited curiosity about the slaughtered wolf: we were left to shift for ourselves. As each incident of this day of variegated experience becomes pieced together in my mind, I remember now with what unerring sureness the Loup-Cervier made his way to the exact stall where Maréchal was stabled; with what expedition and dexterity—pushing me good-naturedly on one side—he saddled and bridled him. I took it more or less as a matter of course then that he should seem to know by instinct where each item was, and how to make use of it; but I now appreciate more clearly the power and habit of observation which enabled him to take note, at all times, of those seeming trifles upon which a man's life may hinge, as he treads the path of adventure.

He led out the horse; and even held the stirrup for me to mount.

"*Vamos!*" he said, as soon as I was in the saddle.

Unmolested, his hand on my stirrup leather, we picked our way through the gates of Langévol. I saw that the house door was closed: there seemed no sign of a Giscourt anywhere, yet I felt the gimlet of watching eyes in my spine, until the high enclosing walls at last intervened and sheltered us.

It was not before our quick walking pace had placed a mile or so between us and the strange hunting settlement of the Wilderness, that silence was broken between us. My headache had returned with severity. Montbars was lost in his own reflections, not, it would seem, very satisfactory ones.

"Who would have thought," he suddenly exclaimed, "to see our parting over the carcase of the wolf, that we and the Giscourt tribe had practically sworn brotherhood a few hours before over the corpses of two wild boars? A singular difference, does it not strike you, my observant English friend, between 'How do you do?' and 'Farewell'?"

"A singularly unpleasant business altogether," said I, wearily, "and one that I would not willingly go through again."

He paused; then shot a quizzical upward look at me.

"Don't be ungrateful, Mr. de Quercy. We are uncommon lucky to get off so cheap. It was a toss-up, I can tell you! They do not yet know that we have smelt out the *pot-aux-roses*. If they did"—he made an expressive gesture. "But, though they are not certain, they are stiff with suspicions. Couldn't make up their minds. Good thing for us! Did you notice how I bluffed? 'Is there any reason?' quoth I, 'why my friend should not admire the view from your ledge?' 'Twas a bit risky; but it cowed him, the old bully! Tell you what it is—they'll stop at nothing to safeguard their secret up there! I'll warrant they keep it in their inner family! Not one of their savages, not one of their hangers-on, all part of the clan as they are, would be allowed in among those rocks. Did you notice how not a huntsman of the lot ventured up the slope after Bertrand and the hounds? As much as their lives were worth—in such a chase, too! That told a tale! It was a queer twist of chance that put us on to it—and therefore I say: Give thanks that here we are, clear for the nonce, of Langévol, its vaults and its ditches.—My poor Muscade! Ah, did you hear his scream?—I might have taken warning by the manner in which those hogs fell from the skies. Yet, who knows? Luck has always led me. And, I tell you again, we have had famous luck to-day in getting away after all."

"Then," said I, thinking myself decidedly acute, "you do not really intend to return there to-morrow?"

He looked at me with a pitying smile; then burst out laughing.

"I am glad," he said at last, "that my polite manner was so convincing! Did you really for one moment credit me with such overpowering solicitude for that disgusting old miscreant?—No, people such as those, with a little secret to keep which, once blown, would send the whole pack of them to the galley-chain, would not stick at a trifle, as I said before. . . . Coiners! That means, you know, the branding-iron and a life sentence. No, I do not think the Louveterie will see

me again. Besides," he added in a slightly altered tone, "I have found out all I want to know about the vaults of Langévol."

A question rose to my lips; but, glancing down at my companion's face, I checked it. Just so had he frowned in the vault when the meaning of its curious furnishing dawned upon him.

They were an odd, dangerous lot certainly, those Giscourt companions; but my handsome friend—M. Montbars to the world, Loup-Cervier to the Louvecelle—he too was surely a mysterious if not doubtful being.

The forest trees had closed about us. Already the little mists were gathering beneath their boles; long shafts of deepening sunshine caught here and there a birch-sapling or a branch of a still leafy oak, and turned them into flame. My companion fell silent. With easy strides he went by my side; keeping Maréchal up to the mark of his swiftest walk, now by slapping the palm of his hand on the flank, now by a cluck of encouragement. Once again, I admired the elastic grace of his sinewy frame; the unparalleled vigour which, after such a day of bodily and mental strenuousness, showed not the faintest trace of fatigue.

"If I were you," he said suddenly, "I'd keep a still tongue up yonder at Castel-Rozac. I mean," he went on with a shade of impatience, as pondering upon the significance of this warning, I did not at once reply, "I mean, it won't be wholesome for either of us to have it all over the country. Keep it very dark, my friend; mysterious vault, Aladdin's lamp and the rest. As dark as the passage which led to them!"

"You can trust my discretion," I said.

I had a private smile. He never guessed how much he was already at the mercy of my discretion. With all his diplomacy and the quick wit that prompted it, he had nevertheless given himself away to me pretty freely; and the night, too, had yielded up its secrets. The lovers were compromisingly in my hands. There was an odd satisfaction for me in the thought of how safe they were there.

"*A bon entendeur, salut*," he said, "your French is so good, I won't translate."

"Not so good as your English," said I.

"Oh, my English!" he laughed. "My South American jargon, you mean! I can bark in a good many languages. 'Tis a useful trick for a stray dog. There's the crest, Mr. de Quercy, and down here is the road that turns off to Millac. Here we part. 'If for ever, then for ever fare thee well,' as your naughty Byron says."

I suppose he saw some wistfulness in my face. Here was my rival, and an adventurer to boot; yet the thought that I might never be in his bright presence again was like a cloud between me and the sun. He gave my knee a pat, with the same kind of indifferent friendliness as if I had been Maréchal.

"No doubt we shall meet again. Indeed, I am certain we shall."

He fell away from beside me; and I rode on. Looking back, I saw him still standing as if watching. He made a gay gesture of adieu, like the salute of a swordsman, then turned, and with a spring dived sideways down the slope and was lost to sight.

I went on. My head ached too consumedly to endure any but the gentlest trot. The way between the high crest and Castel-Rozac, which had, this morning—was it only this morning?—been to me a little traverse of joy, spread lengthened through the darkening valley, nipped by a shrewish wind and full of the breathings of autumn decay.

Melancholy descended upon me like a cloak; and, as in a cloak, I wrapped myself in its folds.

Oh, le beau temps quand j'étais si malheureux! cries a witty French writer. There is truth in the cry, as I well know. In the fervour of youth's very sorrows, there is, to the old man, a for-ever-lost delight. But there could be neither present zest nor future tenderness in the sadness of isolation that encompassed me as I rode through the cold mists.

Of course, I could never carry out my archæological investigations now, among the ruins. Indeed, Gilles Maschefer and his legendary hoard; the stony records of the Hundred Years; the whole allurement of mediæval perspective; all had faded into the background. All this imaginary romance was swept aside by the palpitating interest of actual lives; of the curious drama that was unfolding itself in the modern scenery of Langévol and Castel-Rozac. . . . And yet, I had no real part in this drama, any more than in that idyll I had begun to dream of on the first meeting with la Louvecelle. Among the *dramatis personæ* I was only a kind of "*Charles, his friend*," as in the old play-bills—the utility confidant: unconsidered, little more than a spectator of the action.

Anyone who remembers the April period of his existence will not be surprised to learn that all the while, as Maréchal and I ambled onward, absurd, delightful visions of what might have been were flitting, many-coloured, through my brain. . . . A last act to the play as far as I was concerned; an act in which I myself was the central figure—a noble victim, paying with my life the heroic defence of my friend and rival. . . . Sometimes it was the Wolf who had slaughtered me, though that had an objectionable touch of monotony, after my unpicturesque mauling by Brisco! Preferably my mortal wound was at the hands of one of the Giscourts, after an homeric struggle. Yet always the same climax: a Louvecelle weeping, on one side of me; a Loup-Cervier clasping my hand, on the other. There was doubtless some fever in these imaginings. What a day I had had of it! And that for an invalid, sworn to prudence!

When a twining of the road brought me in view of Castel-Rozac, gradually dominating the plain from the summit of the hill, painted with the last rays of the setting sun, I saw it with a relief that was not wholly physical. A haven for the spirit as well as for the body! The glinting windows smiled on the weary traveller, with a promise of rest, of quiet, of comfort; of decencies for eye, ear and nostril. And I knew that its

walls, haunted by tragedy as they were, would enfold me, protective, dignified. My heart turned with a real affection to the thought of it.

Louradour received me in the hall. I have no doubt I looked shockingly; for, after a single glance at my face, he checked the volubility of his greeting reproaches and gave me his support to my room without another word; an exercise of tact that must have been positively painful to one of his temperament.

He pulled off my riding boots; divested me of my outer garments with the air of a nurse severely yet conscientiously ministering to a child in disgrace. And, leaving me wrapped in my dressing gown, sunk in an arm-chair before the comfort of a wood fire, he disappeared.

When he came back, it was a message from his lord: another instance of the delicate hospitality I had always received from those hands.

"I told M. le Comte what a state the gentleman has returned in—'Eyes sunk in the head, voice extinguished,' said I. 'Scare able to drag one foot after the other. With one of those headaches that prevent a man seeing out of his eyes.' M. le Comte bids me say that he is certain M. de Quercy would like to be served with supper in his room to-night, and remain quite quiet. To-morrow, *au déjeuner*, when M. le Comte has his guests, every one will be much interested to hear how his honour has fared upon his visit to that savage place, Langévol."

The suggestion was welcome; and, with a suitable message of thanks, I gladly closed with it.

"Maréchal," went on Louradour, as he busied himself with my clothes, "seems very fresh. But I fear," he said, with a biting accent of reproof, "the recommendations I permitted myself to make to you, sir, have been singularly neglected! I shall tremble to face Monsieur Roubilliac to-morrow after the Mass. I can only pray, however, that his honour will not be too much the worse when he has had a good night's rest. M. le Comte would be disappointed not to have him present on

the Sunday—the Sunday," said Louradour, swelling out his chest, "when we entertain our neighbours——"

He broke off. He was gazing with an expression of comic astonishment at the pistol which had served me so well. He had just removed it and its fellow from my pockets and was about to place them in a drawer. The lowered flint and the lifted pan-cover, still black from the flash, told their obvious tale. He stared from the weapon to me and back, opened his mouth and shut it again. This time it was surely a miracle of self-denial that kept him silent.

"My good Louradour," said I, "to-morrow I will tell you all about it. To-morrow! Suffice it for the moment to say that that pistol has killed no one of more consequence than a wolf they call Bertrand."

"Bertrand! You have killed Bertrand! And his honour who had promised to be careful of himself!—*Troun de lair!*—Bertrand!"

I was afraid I had made a mistake, and that the floods of eloquence were about to be let loose on me; so I hastened to add, in an exhausted tone:

"I really think I must go to bed at once. No, I could not eat supper. Some water to drink—that's all. And then good night, there's a good fellow."

The major-domo surveyed me with some anxiety. In submissive dumbness he placed the glass jug by my bedside—not forgetting the little gold-engraved bottle of orangeflower-water, with the sugar basin to match, which are never absent from a well-appointed French bedroom. Then, with a bow and a last stare, he wished me *bon repos* and left the room.

But if it was possible to escape conversation, it was less easy to dismiss the fleeting, dancing pictures of the day's experiences—the tiring iteration of the riddle in which they were involved. Every incident, trifling or important; even those which, at the time, had seemed the result of mere chance, now assumed an air of concatenation—elusive, incapable of proof, but somehow or other undeniable. The secrets of Langévol, its stones

and its people, balanced nicely the secrets of Loup-Cervier and his pervading presence—a presence, now suggestive only of a lover intent on a troubadour courtship of a most peculiar kind ; now of a secret emissary on the track of some nefarious organisation ; anon of a mere adventurer bent on some desperate game for his own hand.

The discovery of the gold in the cave, confirming as it did my previous book knowledge of the legendary treasure, would have been to me a matter of the most thrilling excitement, had it not been for the Loup-Cervier's attitude. . . . He was taken aback, he was furious, he was utterly confounded and disgusted. Why ? . . . The only possible explanation of this placed him very far away from the romantic lover, the gallant *chouan*.

And the man himself, with his masterful young personality, his opportune trick of gaily cantering in upon every scene at the psychological moment—whether upon the Louvecelle on the bluff, in the sunset glow ; or upon me, at the corner of the road ; or yet upon the Louvetiers in the nick of hunting time—it matters not; wherever he appeared, he had, with one gay leap, as it were, by some triumph of audacity and adaptiveness, landed into the central scheme of another's private life. . . . Witness our meeting, supposed to be quite fortuitous, on this October morning, and our parting at night, having shared more than one mortal peril, and still sharing a dangerous secret.

I fell into fitful dozes. A phantasmagoria filled my brain, passing in and out of dreams, between waking and sleep. . . . Now a knot of brown-faced huntsmen, one moment laughing in the brass tones of hunting horns, the next scowling blackly with all the mien of stage-brigands—"the Miller and his men!" A pell-mell, a circling saraband of white wolves, tawny hounds and double-tusked black boars ; with dun Muscade, foam-coated, tearing from rock to rock ; Maréchal meanwhile sedately stepping it through the turmoil. . . . And, dominating everywhere, Montbars! Here flashing his

pleasant smile; there, with lips set, savagely frowning to hear the coins ring gold. . . . Montbars with the wolf's paw on his chest, his teeth bared; the ice-blue flash of his knife, the look on his face, when, weaponless, he was forced to his knee. . . . Montbars, two fingers on the old man's pate, drawling his odd fluent English. . . . Montbars, casting into the cavern a deep-mouthed Spanish oath! . . . Frenchman, Southern American, Spaniard: whatever he might be, a figure all of romance. He strutted in a score of different *rôles* through my tired wits: on the hill crest, the Captain of the road; on the bluff, Loup-Cervier, bending to kiss his lady's wrist; in the woods, the Wild Hunter of legends, whom no obstacle can arrest; amid the louvetiers, the knowing bottle-companion, tossing "the rubies." . . . Scamp, scapegrace, soldier of fortune? Yes, no doubt: withal always a goodly figure. A man! A man to love. . . . La Louvecelle loves him. And he—of course, he is mad of her! Has he not come right across France just to kiss her hand on a wind-swept bluff, in the sunset light—the accepted secret lover! . . .

La Louvecelle loves him! Does she think he is here only for her, or does she know all his mysterious plans? An unwise love—yet, who shall blame her? . . . *Ah, canario!*

Hereabouts I believe I fell asleep. And slept soundly. I awoke, very late in the broad daylight, not much the worse, after all, for my first day of "historical research."

CHAPTER XII

SOME PUPPETS OF THE PAST

I SLEPT late, as I said; and, by the time my toilet was completed—a slower process than usual, owing to the absence at his devotions of the attentive Louradour—the faint music of organ and chaunt which penetrated to my room from the chapel had already fallen silent. The *Messe chantée* was over. I felt something of a heathen as, my Sabbath unconsecrated, I stepped down the stone stairs, clad in "Sunday best," for I had not forgotten the announcement made with pride by the old servant: "We entertain our neighbours."

Louradour, emerging from the banqueting hall at the sound of my descending footsteps, rushed to open the gallery door. A buzz of conversation greeted my ear as he did so, which the announcement of my name struck into stillness.

The great reception-room, hitherto only beheld by me as the appropriate setting for a dignified tragedy of isolation, now presented a different, an incongruous aspect. The handful of guests, some eight or nine, all told, who were grouped about the hearth, and who turned a curious scrutiny on the stranger, seemed only to emphasize emptiness and bear witness to decadence. Here, then, was all that was left, in the Rouergue, of the great power of France, her ancient nobility: this faded company, these ghosts of past splendour, these puppets playing, it seemed, at a forgotten pomp!

I think of them, now, as of mere misty dream pictures, among memories of the past still life-like; these ladies with their old-world hooped skirts, their

towering coiffures where white hair was unnecessarily powdered, or the most unconvincing wigs replaced the dearth of years. These withered faces, startlingly rouged on the cheek-bones, incongruously patched at the corners of wrinkled lips. These bony hands flaunting ruffles, waving fans! . . . Save in one instance, the ladies who had responded to the invitation of Castel-Rozac were all pre-Revolution belles; contemporaries of their host. With one exception, also, no less ancient were their attendant cavaliers. . . . What befrilled waistcoats over shrunken chests! What lost antics with snuff-boxes and quizzing glass; what forgotten capers with silk-stockinged grasshopper legs!

The young couple who formed the exception to the noble eld of the neighbourhood here convened, fitted nevertheless curiously into the scene; for the inherited arrogance, the *morgue* of the old generation cleaved to them, and their newer mode added but a note of provincialism which rendered it ridiculous.

The jovial red face of my doctor contrasted, as violently as the pale silhouette of the meek grey-headed abbé harmonized, with the gathering.

I have not spoken of La Louvecelle. . . . Can I describe how her splendour of youth, strength, life, and beauty struck me in the midst of that mouldering company? Like a glorious tulip, rising alone in some dead, moss-grown garden—like a single passionate star in a dusky sky! She stood apart. Her country attire had been changed for a garment which was obviously of the latest fashion, as expressed by some Paris artist. It was grey, as usual, I remember; and short, clinging; moulding her exquisite young figure well-nigh as closely as the tunic moulds the grace of the Springing Diana of the Louvre. . . . Brisco stood by her side; and she had one hand on his head.

The Comte de Ruffeleu, stepping from the hearth, himself brought me forward. And the pressure of his hand on my shoulder, the kindliness of the gaze he turned upon me, were almost paternal:

"I rejoice, my young friend, I rejoice to see you so little affected by yesterday's fatigues!—My valued guest, here," he turned, as he spoke, with his stately air, to the assembly, "is but just recovered from a regrettable accident which he met under my roof, and of which you may have heard. As I was myself struck with illness on the same evening, there is, I may say, a pleasing coincidence in that our recoveries should also be simultaneous. Nevertheless, youth is imprudent! Is it possible, young man, that, as I have been given to understand, you have been wolf-hunting? Wolf-hunting, on the very first day of emancipation! We must, indeed, hear more about this anon. Let me now present you to Madame la Marquise de Corbon-Moissac, and the Marquis. And to those other good neighbours who do me the honour to take their midday repast at my table, after driving two leagues or more, to attend the Mass of our estimable curé, M. l'Abbé Morel. —Marquise, here is my young English friend."

The lady—she was the oldest, the most faded, the most pitifully berouged and behooped, of these living spectres of the *ancien régime*—lifted her gold-handled eye-glass to her hooked nose and surveyed me with the grimmest disfavour. I advanced, as in duty bound, while, sonorously, rolling with evident gusto upon his tongue those names that had for him so exquisite a flavour of distinction, the Comte de Ruffeleu completed the introductions. Pungencies of camphor and musk, of *rappée* and some faint secret aroma of mildew, caught me by the nostrils, as the great dames swept a haughty hoop and the gentlemen strutted a condescending leg.

I knew, afterwards, that, bent half-way to the earth, I ought to have laid claim to kiss those sallow, knuckly, beringed hands; that I ought to have scraped an answering gambado to those aged shanks. But, in my English way, I merely bowed. A malevolent gleam sprang into appraising eyes: I had, without knowing it, walked straight into the ill graces of the aristocracy of Rouergue.

Something of the disapproval I excited was

extended to my host, for the Marquise turned an inquisitorial look upon him. He was indeed in unwonted spirits; and, no doubt, his attitude towards me was noted as something quite unsuitable, well-nigh indecorous. Behind his spouse, the Marquis grimaced a smile, and responded to my introduction by a few words of what, I suppose, he meant to be English.

For the first time, and—I feel the pity of it still—for the last, I heard the Comte laugh.

"Mr. de Quercy speaks French, my dear Marquis, as fluently as if four hundred and twenty-two years did not separate him from that last ancestor of his who lived on our soil!"

The poor, good, old count! Had he really, I wonder, worked out this distinguished pedigree for his own satisfaction? Or was he moved by a benevolent endeavour to place me on an equal footing with his noble neighbours? The dominant passion was strong enough in him to warrant either assumption. The effect was instantaneous. There was a rustle through the circle. The eye-glasses converging upon me were suddenly animated by the blandest interest.

"Ah!" exclaimed the Marquise. "Really? I had no idea!"

The "Ah!" ran smilingly from one to another. I saw every guest present ready to acclaim the unexpectedly distinguished visitor with immediate affability. And my English spirit revolted.

When the one young man of the party, besides myself—the Vicomte de Montauban—drew near my host with an ingratiating, heart-shaped mouth, and declared that, as there had been an alliance, some three hundred years ago, between a Sire de Montauban and a Demoiselle de Querci, he perhaps might claim to be connected with "milord," I caught Adrienne's mocking gaze full fixed upon me and saw the scornful curl of her lip.

"Pray, M. le Comte," cried I, with what I now know was an unbecoming deliberateness, "do not let me stand under false colours in the eyes of your friends. I am

no lord. I have no reason to believe that I am connected with any noble family of France. I beg to present myself before them only as a plain English gentleman."

As you may see a puff of wind blow a field of standing corn all in one direction, and another cast it back towards the opposite pole, so did withdrawal intensified follow the relaxation of the company towards the stranger.

My host's countenance became overcast; but, in spite of his ruling passion, I do not think his annoyance was altogether with me. Truth to say, I did not care; for Louvecelle had flashed me a smile, and I caught the word "Bravo," as it fell from those lovely lips.

So, it would seem, did the Vicomte; for he turned upon her with that air of insolence veiled by a superpolish of courtesy which I came to know was his peculiar gift.

"Mademoiselle does me the honour to address me?"

"No, sir, I was commending my dog. 'Tis a good honest fellow, and he pleases me."

The universal glassy stare which was withering me now turned with scarcely less condemnation upon her. I had noted she stood apart. I now perceived that the aloofness was reciprocal. The existence of Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu was hardly recognized by her cousin's guests. It was not surprising. Glancing from her to them, I told myself that sooner would fire and water blend, South kiss the bleak North.

It has been said that Louradour was a tactful person. Never, surely, did he make his appearance with more soothing appropriateness than at this moment.

"Monsieur le Comte is served," he announced in bassoon tones, flinging back both wings of the great door.

The Comte de Ruffeleu, a faint flush still on his parchment cheeks, began with dignity to marshal his guests.

"Watch, young man, watch!" whispered a voice in my ear. The portly form of Roubilliac was close behind

me. "Here is a ceremony that takes place every Sunday that finds our poor old host on foot. If I had not seen the comedy so often, it would be enough to kill one with laughing. You realize that the Marquis de Corbon-Moissac alone has sufficient quarterings in his coat of arms to match with the Comtesse de Talmont; while our host himself of course can offer his arm to none other than the Marquise, whose years are only equalled by the number of her ancestors. This being established, the rest of the pairing follows almost automatically. But look, look! *Baste*, I can still laugh at it! Behold the Marquis, old mummy, approach his antediluvian partner; his hand on his chest! 'I am quite overwhelmed at the good fortune which has befallen me this day! You are adorable to-day, Comtesse!' See her flutter and smile! She'll never see seventy-eight again, and, word of honour, there's hardly a drop of blood left in her veins to blush. But she believes she's blushing, she believes she's adorable. All that old clockwork went to pieces in 1790, and now that it has been put together again, it doesn't know it ever stopped!"

Marquis was paired with Comtesse and Comte with Vicomtesse; and, by a nice shade of convention, the abbé took a decorous stand by one Madame de Chabrol, who was a *Chanoinesse*.

At this point our host had reached the little group of which we—Adrienne, myself and the doctor—formed a part. Awhile he hesitated; it was indeed a difficult nut to crack for one to whom the rules of precedence were a matter of so much seriousness. The claims of the Vicomte to conduct Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu were balanced by the courtesy due to the foreigner and the stranger. But the manner in which I had repudiated my pedigree, no doubt weighed against me. Our host motioned the Vicomte towards Adrienne. But she uncompromisingly took my arm.

"Oh, please, pass on, pass on! Cousin Gontran, Madame de Corbon-Moissac becomes impatient. You will permit me to select Mr. de Quercy; I positively

cannot wait another moment for the story of the wolf hunt! Vicomte, Dr. Roubilliac here will superintend your diet. He will know exactly what is the best wine for the digestion of a dyspeptic person."

It was obviously very scandalous. Looks were exchanged, full of portent. "The wretched girl," one dowager signalled to another, "will break our poor friend's heart with a *mésalliance*—the end of all her eccentricities!"

But her sunburnt fingers were on my arm. The Comte de Ruffeleu had no choice but to acquiesce.

"Your pardon, fair huntress," laughed the doctor, as we stood waiting for our turn, casting a quizzical look at the Vicomte's offended visage, "I do not give consultations gratis to my best clients. How could I get my *étrennes* if Monsieur de Montauban did not send for me at his next indigestion?"

The Vicomte shrugged his shoulders; his prominent eyes sought first my countenance and then that of the Louvecelle, with an insufferable meaning:

"There was no need for excuses, I assure you, Mademoiselle. To understand all is to forgive all."

"Ah! Dieu," said Adrienne, as we walked out together through the great doors, and she was not particular to lower her voice, "have you got things like that in England, or do they only grow with us?"

We stood, with bent heads, while M. l'Abbé said a Latin grace, not omitting a thanksgiving for the Royal Restoration. I have described the dining hall and the impression of overwhelming loneliness it had made upon me, on my first acquaintance with it at my *tête-à-tête* with M. de Ruffeleu. I cannot say that I found the atmosphere more exhilarating now that guests sat about the board, and that the echoing ministrations of Louradour were supplemented by those of a knife-boy, a groom and the fat old coachman.

It had been, however, with pulses quickened by pleasurable anticipations that I took my seat beside Diana of the Hills. My passion, I think I have made clear, was almost from the beginning a hopeless one.

I knew my rival, now; and admired him beyond reason. I understood but too well that the Louvecelle would never call any man husband save him in whom she placed so unhesitating a trust, whom she met in secret amid the woods by day, and summoned to conference at midnight. Doubt of her, if I had really had any, vanished the moment I found myself once more under her clear eye. Audacious she might be; reckless to peril—but base, never! A young man must be pretty far sunk in the imbecility of love, when, in such circumstances as mine, he can nevertheless be rejoiced to dizziness because his lady commends him as an honest dog! But so it was with me.

As usual, ecstasy was brief and disillusion prompt.

I had mentally rehearsed the telling of my wonderful tale in half a dozen different surroundings: at the golden hour, on the terrace, with the scent of the wood smoke and of the fading leaves in our nostrils and the tune of the robin, that songster of sweet renunciations, lending poetry to my magnanimity—for I meant to be very magnanimous, and there was a double edge of satisfaction in the prospect; I wanted, not only to stand as a fine fellow in her thought, but as a gallant comrade in his! . . . Or, if not upon the terrace, for the October day would not tarry for a lingering company, it would have been in some exquisite snatched hour, by the hearth in the library or the gallery. I would see again the firelight paint her in carmine and crown her glorious head with flame. . . . Or perhaps, she might—and I could afford to wait for such a prospect—she might indulge me in the end with that ride beside her, away through those woods, up those moors, russet here and pale gold with dying grasses there, that still spread so beautifully in my memory. . . . At the very worst, the tale might have been whispered for her ear alone in the midst, and in defiance of, that tedious gathering. There would have been a zest in this, heightened by the knowledge of the delicious yet mistaken construction every censorious witness would be placing upon our appearance of intimacy.

The doctor hailed me across the table. I think, honest old Jacobin as he was at heart, it was for the pleasure of showing me how little he was awed by these superior beings, and showing them how little he cared for their exclusion of me.

"And here are pretty stories, my patient! What, sir? Wolf-hunting! If such a statement had come from any save the lips of our venerated host, I should have refused to credit it. Wolf-hunting, at your first jump out of bed, one may say. It is well said: 'All Englishmen are mad!'"

Before I could reply, the Count turned his glance upon me. There was doubt and some dissatisfaction in that extinguished gaze. He had not been best pleased, that was certain, at his young relative's breezy choice of me. Yet I felt, and his subdued voice, as he now addressed me, confirmed the impression, that a great fatigue had succeeded the unwonted liveliness of a few minutes before. Old people—I speak wittingly —are subject to these rapid alternations; the flash of the wasted light leaps high, only to sink yet deeper.

"Mr. de Quercy will have to tell us of his experiences at Langévol. There is an exciting report"—he turned back to the table, with an effort to rally his weak tones—that Bertrand the Devil, of whom we all have heard so long, has at last been accounted for. Now, Monsieur de Montauban, this will interest you, for you have had special cause, as we know, to desire the destruction of that monster, that second Beast of Gévaudan. Yes, indeed, Bertrand has been killed, I am informed, and by no less a person than my young English visitor!"

All eyes were turned upon me, and I believe that I blushed, in unmistakable British fashion. If the old gentleman, in his odd pathetic fancy for me, had thought to place me in a more favourable light, he was singularly mistaken. To attack prejudice is to offend. In no eyes was the look of dislike more apparent than in the prominent orbs of the Vicomte.

"Bertrand the Devil?" he exclaimed, "and by this

gentleman? Never! Oh, one has heard many tales of the slaying of Bertrand. Every wretched, mangy wolf that is shot from behind a hedge is trumpeted as Bertrand."

Louradour, at that moment by the gentleman's chair, carefully holding in his grasp a cradled bottle with the bloom of an exquisite antiquity upon it, here intervened with the ease of the foreign servant:

"Monsieur le Vicomte will excuse me for contradicting him. It is Bertrand himself and no other that has been slain. And the whole country knows it. They rang the bells at Millac church, and there was a special service of thanksgiving. The head of Bertrand —what was left of it, saving your presence—is already over the gateway of Langévol for all to see."

"The English are usually sportsmen," remarked the Marquise. She fixed me, as she spoke, across the table, with little, piercing eyes full of malice. It was evident that she considered this statement sufficient to dispose of any pride I might have in the achievement.

"It is the English education," said the Vicomte. He had a strident voice, which drew my glance upon him, where it rested in amazement to see the gusto and elegance with which he was mopping up the sauce on his plate with little sippets of bread. "They are nurtured on raw beefsteaks and *la boxe*."

"Raw beefsteaks! Horrible!" cried the Vicomtesse, and shuddered ostentatiously.

The doctor, who had kept the Vicomte under an angry regard from the first moment of his attack upon me, now broke out:

"And since Bertrand has been killed, it is Monsieur le Vicomte who has made the mistake this time. It is not a case of the mangy wolf shot from behind a hedge; it is well and truly the finest stroke of courage and skill that has been done in the district in my time. It has been reserved for an Englishman, and he but out of bed, to kill Bertrand, who has defied the art of all our chasseurs—even yours, I believe, M. le Vicomte—and the Giscourts for years."

"But M. de Montauban," cried Louvecelle, with her challenging laugh, "has not been nurtured on raw beef-steak: only frogs, as the English proclaim, and that explains everything."

I have said that this gentleman, the solitary young man of the party, had a protuberant eye and a retreating chin. As I now looked at him, I was struck—no doubt so was all the company, however unwillingly—by his resemblance to the amphibian in question.

Roubilliac gurgled with laughter, a laughter in which I could not help joining. I saw the little, mild, mouse-like abbé change a faint smile into a cough behind a sheltering hand.

"Cousin Gontran," said Adrienne, "shall we not drink to the slayer of Bertrand?"

Her championship of me was too large-hearted not to fire a responsive generosity.

"Nay," cried I, "if honour is to be given where honour is due, I beg to inform the company that it is another than myself who must be toasted. My share in the great transaction only amounts to having given the *coup-de-grâce*. The quarry was already forced. I put my pistol to his head. Bertrand was forced, I say, by one who, even from the little I beheld of the chase, I shall always regard as the finest sportsman I have ever seen—though no Englishman!"

At my first word of disclaimer, I felt Diana start beside me. I did not dare to turn to look at her, but my voice grew the warmer as I went on.

"Aha!" croaked the Vicomte: "that is the mystery then! One of those Langévol scoundrels after all—their *métier*."

"By no means," retorted I. "I for one should not at all want to toast the Giscourt gentry for carrying on their trade of wolf-slaughter. He who forced Bertrand was a very different kind of person. They would have lost the famous quarry again this time as on all the other occasions, but for the horsemanship, the strategy, if I may so express it, the splendid audacity of one

who casually joined the chase—a stranger like myself."

An amazed silence had fallen about the table; even the servants, Louradour at their head, had paused in their service to listen open-mouthed.

CHAPTER XIII

CONCERNING ONE FABIEN MONTBARS

BEFORE beginning I looked at the Louvecelle. She met my glance with an admirable self-control; but her eyes were very bright. A carnation burned on either cheek. In the stillness, in the perfect repose of her attitude there was a contained fire; she was as the alabaster lamp of the flame of love.

With an odd mixture of bitterness and enthusiasm I now addressed myself to the count. My blood was up. I spoke well, I think; picturesquely, vividly. Starting from the moment of my meeting with the stranger on the wild horse; passing through the inconceivable episode of the falling boars; describing our reception and entertainment by the sinister crew of Langévol, I brought my listeners triumphantly to the ledge of the cliff-castle and the dispatching of Bertrand. Although, mindful of the reticence exacted from me by Montbars, I had, regretfully enough, to be dumb upon the subject of the caves and their strange secrets. Although it was with positive tameness, compared to the reality, that the wolf met his death at my hands, it was a stirring saga to which I treated the company, and the epic leap across the ravine, the breast-to-breast struggle with the leviathan of wolves, lost nothing of its touch-and-go breathlessness upon my lips.

I stopped suddenly upon the ring of my own pistol-shot, and once again sought the only approval I cared for. My self-effacement—for I had taken an almost acrid pleasure in heroically colouring the picture of another's prowess at my own expense—might well have

won me a smile, a look ; perhaps even a secret hand pressure to dream over in the long lonely days to come. But I had aimed my arrow too well ; blown my trumpet upon too true a note! Adrienne's eyes did not see me. She was not as much as conscious of my presence. My insignificant personality was altogether obliterated by the splendidly emerging figure of her chosen lover. Her beauty and radiance were something startling at that moment ; the gulf between us yawned as never before.

A little cough from my host recalled my attention to him. He was leaning back in his chair ; his high, melancholy eyebrows were faintly drawn ; his long nose drooped. Distaste was written in every line of his aristocratic countenance. Had I not been the chosen favourite of his lonely heart, I must have brought upon myself, I believe, one of his terrifying, bristling stares. But, as it was, resentment diverged into another channel. The, as yet, unnamed object of my panegyric alone came in for his condemnation ; and the Vicomte, aptly, I am sure, phrased the ancient Royal Louvetier's sentiments when he exclaimed, upon an explosion of cackles :

"A mighty hunter before the Lord, upon my word! A fit companion for the Giscourts, my faith! Ah! Monsieur de Ruffeleu, that was not the way you saw the noble hunts of France conducted when our county had the honour of your leadership in the chase!"

"Other times, other manners, Monsieur de Montauban," said the Comte, with a bitter smile. "I am glad," he added then to mark his unaltered courtesy towards myself, "that my young English friend here was able to withdraw himself early in the day from so unmannerly an experience. As it is, I fear he will have no good impression of our hunting gentry to carry away. And I am sure," his glance kindled upon me, "that we all feel the courage with which he risked his life, at the dictates of humanity, for a mere casual acquaintance."

There was certainly no question now of drinking

the health of the slayer of Bertrand; whether the honour belonged to Montbars or myself. This Rouergue gathering, representative of the fine flower of the French *ancien régime*, had, it is true, been highly entertained while listening to my narrative; but it did not prevent it from classing my dramatic verve as vulgar, and the unconventional antics of the friend I was vaunting as positive indecency.

I consulted the countenance of my fair neighbour to see how this odd twist of events affected her. Her eyes were cast down; the bloom and glow seemed fading from her, as if the flame within were being gradually withdrawn. I then glanced obliquely at the doctor. He winked back at me with a broad, sardonic grin.

"No doubt, my dear Ruffeleu," quavered the Marquis, "this extraordinary person must somehow belong to the Louveterie. The young Englishman is doubtless mistaken. Certainly one of the Giscourts—one of the young ones. Our poor district could surely not produce such a savage outside that band!"

Montauban cut in:

"If not one of the band, worthy to belong to it at least! No doubt adopted by now, with all the rites of brotherhood."

"It is strange," the Marquis opined, "that despite the happy return of our King and all the excellent measures which are being taken to repress the dreadful independence of the people, such adventurers should be allowed free passage along our roads."

"Alas, Marquise," said the Comte, "when a Baron Giscourt, a baron of the Corsican, stands confirmed in one of the highest posts in the country by the Government officials, what can we expect?"

"We shall no longer feel able to drive unescorted to a neighbouring château," complained the Vicomtesse.

She was a young woman, with a strong resemblance to her husband. I have often noted how, in the matrimonial market, like takes to like.

"Reassure yourself, my dear," consoled this gentleman, rolling his obtruding eye coldly upon her. He raised his voice. It was obvious he wanted to attract an audience in his turn. "I have just returned from Paris. There were symptoms there that the authorities are at last waking up to their responsibilities."

A universal movement greeted this announcement, a rustle of silks, a craning of necks.

"Ah! you have been in Paris?"

Monsieur de Montauban had secured his effect. It was evidently an event in Rouergue society when one of its members visited the distant metropolis. He cleared his throat.

"But last night did I return, after a fortnight's stay."

"Here is something at last that is interesting," said the Marquise, with a gleam of her little, wrathful, black eye on me. That was the characteristic of her countenance: her eye was always angry. It gave an odd but not pleasant vitality to a personality otherwise terribly akin to a mummy. "You will be able to tell us the latest, Monsieur de Montauban."

"The latest is that our singular Minister of Police, M. Fouché—I beg his pardon," the Vicomte sneered—"M. le Duc d'Otrante——"

"That canaille!" muttered the Comte de Ruffeleu.

"M. Fouché!" said the Marquise, fanning herself violently. "If the safety of our poor country is to go on depending upon such a creature as M. Fouché——"

"Ah, but let us not," laughed the Marquis, "forget the proverb: set a thief to catch a thief!"

"But, unfortunately, that is rather where M. Fouché has failed—*hinc illæ lachrymæ!*" pursued the Vicomte. "The court is very much annoyed, it seems, at the failure of the police lately. And M. Fouché has been given to understand that, unless he can bring to justice those responsible for the escape of Lavalette——"

"How!—Lavalette escaped!" cried the two comtes together.

A very silent personage was the one guest who

bore the same title as our host. He had up to then confined himself to the appreciation of the dishes and the vintages, and to such contribution to the general converse as a shrug, a grimace, or the wave of a fat mouse-coloured hand. Now he echoed M. de Ruffe-leu's exclamation, "Canaille!" with guttural energy.

Yes, that "canaille of a Bonapartist minister," Lavalette, had escaped. It had made a great stir in Paris at the time. Some, at the table, were already aware of the fact, although it was only three weeks old, and they lived in the inner depths of the provinces. Our host, however, during his illness had not studied his *Gazette de France;* and the old Comte de Valmont was, most likely, one of those who, as often as not, forget even to unfold their news-sheet.

There was a closer indrawing of chairs and a more intimate leaning across the table towards M. de Montauban, fresh from Paris. My Diana flung herself back in her seat, with an air of scorn which contrasted sharply with the general eagerness.

"Whatever M. Fouché's secret sympathies may be," resumed the well-informed man, "there is no mistaking his royalist zeal now. The Bonapartist ex-minister Lavalette, escaped from prison, is now safe out of France—they say, by the way, he was helped off by some English officers—but that other Bonapartist ex-minister, M. Fouché, has sworn to bring to book the real organiser of the escape. He has set Vidocq on the track. Cunning old ferret, that Vidocq: he has lost no time in nosing out the threads of the plot. He has been able, I hear, to bring Fouché the name of the chief conspirator—and all the details of his private life for the last year or so. The name and description of the miscreant is being posted all over France. In fine: complete success for M. Fouché—but for one trifling detail,"—the Vicomte's snigger was very arch—"the culprit himself is not to be found!"

"Well, I, for one, hope," put in Roubilliac, "that he may never be. This hounding of political enemies is a disgrace to France. Marshal Brune and how many

others, murdered by the new loyalists! Labédoyère, shot! Ney, already condemned! And poor Lavalette, but for your man—Faith, I would like to shake him by the hand, that miscreant, as you call him! By the way, what is the name of the miscreant aforesaid, you who come from the fountain head of knowledge?"

"The name, if it can help you in your aspirations, my worthy Æsculapius," returned the Vicomte icily, "is Montbars—Fabien Montbars."

I do not know if I started; but it is certain Louvecelle did not. I felt her, by my side, turn, as it were, to stone. Rallying all my energies, I tried to seem at once interested and indifferent.

"Is that any well-known name?" I asked. And I heard my own voice as if some one else were talking. And it was almost as though, with the eyes of another man, that I marked the expression of contempt appearing upon one face after another.

"Montbars?"—"Montbars?" As far as names went, this one was of no consequence, of no significance: the name of one who, in the estimation of the present company, did not "exist."

"But, stay," said the old Comte. He was leaning, I remember, with one elbow on the table, holding to his nostrils a tiny glass of Tokay—to serve Tokay had been Louradour's last attention before leaving the room with his satellites. "Montbars? Was there not a notorious pirate of that name—in the days of the *Grand Monarque?* Finished his career at the end of a rope, I believe. Montbars? Yes—*Montbars l'exterminateur*, they called him."

"No doubt an ancestor!" cackled the Marquis.

"Like enough," went on the Vicomte, "for, according to Vidocq's report, the fellow in question has been a privateer himself, among other occupations. But—the strangest thing!—this *chevalier d'industrie*, strutting it in the garb of a gentleman, a gambler, a violent duellist—and not always on the right side of politics—was actually out, the report is absolute about that, in the Hundred Days. A *chouan*, if you please!"

"Ah, bah!" cried Roubilliac. "A *chouan*, and risking his life to save a Bonapartist!"

"A fact nevertheless.—Ah, I see Mademoiselle does me the honour to be interested at last."

Adrienne had indeed straightened herself, with an abrupt movement, and was steadily fixing the malicious countenance.

"Certainly, sir," she said coldly. "A man who has gone out for the cause of legitimity is like to interest me more than one who was content to sit at home and let foreign soldiers do his fighting."

"Personally, I never approved of that movement in the West," put in the Comte. He spoke quickly and seemed anxious to prevent his relative from further airing her emancipated ideas. "For one or two real royalists, there were in it scores of adventurers—fellows playing for their own hand—little better than *condottieri*."

"However it may be, Mademoiselle," said the Vicomte acidly, "it is not wholesome to be called Montbars, just now, for Fouché has sworn——"

He was interrupted. The door opened, and Louradour entered once more. On his countenance the usual stately expression of respect struggled with a burning excitement.

I have, I think, sufficiently insisted upon the peculiar, the unctuous pomposity of the excellent Gascon's announcements. I do not believe that I ever heard him proclaim with a finer effect of pulpit eloquence than at that moment:

"Monsieur le Comte, there is at the door a gentleman who asks the honour to be admitted. He gives the name of Montbars."

The silence of stupefaction fell upon the room. I put out my hand blindly under the table to try and touch Louvecelle's. She gave it a savage grip and then threw it back.

Roubilliac's eyes blazed with delighted curiosity.

"Talk of the wolf—and you see his tail round the

corner!" he exclaimed, little guessing how apposite was the homely French proverb.

The old Comte rose from his chair.

"What—what is the meaning of this?" he stammered angrily.

Upon the question, Louradour's ill-repressed excitement burst forth:

"Monseigneur!—it is the gentleman who has forced Bertrand, Bertrand the Devil, which M. de Quercy shot! He desired me to explain to Monsieur le Comte that he trusts it may not be considered an intrusion that he should call upon Monseigneur's guest, M. de Quercy. It is owing, he declares"—Louradour drew a deep breath and turned to me with a flourish—"owing to M. de Quercy's bravery that M. Montbars is still alive this day. And he begs for the favour of an interview—after presenting his respects to M. le Comte, as in duty bound—in order to express personally his gratitude, and also to inquire after M. de Quercy's health."

The butler now looked back glowingly to his master.

"What overweening impudence!" said the Marquise under her breath. Her glance, as usual, sought me.

The Vicomte made a muttered reference to English complicity. The good rough voice of the doctor rose between them:

"Ah, bah! No—I don't believe it! It would be too good!—I don't flatter myself for an instant this can be the fellow. There must be scores of Montbars about the world. I'll not get in my handshake so easily."

Adrienne suddenly rose to her feet, and faced her guardian with a flaming look.

"Is it possible, Cousin Gontran, that you can hesitate for one moment upon so ordinary an act of courtesy. What can it be to you who calls upon our guest?"

The clear tones vibrated. But the Comte, struck upon so delicate a point in him as that of hospitality, failed to notice their extraordinary passion.

"You are right, Adrienne," he said. "Admit the gentleman, Louradour. Show him into the gallery."

Still standing, he now addressed me.

"Pray believe, Mr. de Quercy, that when it is my privilege to entertain a guest at Castel-Rozac, I have no greater pleasure than that he should consider it as his home. My friends and I will leave you to converse with your visitor, as soon as I have received his salutations.—Marquise, shall we move into the gallery?"

He offered his arm with what was almost an exaggeration of his meticulous formality. There was a great scraping of chairs, a rustling of antique silks, as the company proceeded to leave the table in solemn order.

Adrienne caught my arm. I could feel her quiver: not, I could see, with anything approaching fear, but rather with the tension of her rebellious spirit. She was a born fighter. Then, as ever after, as long as I knew her, she was a creature of the straightest impulse; one to whom prudence was contemptible, diplomacy abhorrent. I realized, with a sense of apprehension, that, thwarted and reckless, she was capable of rushing her love story to its doom as fatally as Montbars his thoroughbred at the chasm.

She addressed never a word to me. But, when we reached the gallery she went and stood away from all the rest, Brisco by her side, even as I had found her on my entrance.

Louradour, with his southerner's sense of dramatic effect, delayed the visitor until we had duly assembled. Then he had full scope.

"Monsieur Fabien Montbars!" he announced.

The ladies had gathered into a group. The Comte de Ruffeleu stood in front of the hearth. The Vicomte had drawn close to the Marquis and the Comte de Talmont, who stood side by side; and I saw both these gentlemen incline their old heads to his busy whispers. The room felt charged with danger, as a heavy August day with thunder.

Montbars entered with light tread and easy bearing; grave and courteous. His manner was so unerringly suited to the situation that it struck me as more like a piece of polished acting than of real life. Indeed, as I

knew but too well, he was playing a part, and one of extreme delicacy.

He gave our host exactly the right kind of bow—compound of deference and manly self-confidence. The Comte returned it formally and did not extend his hand.

"It is most amiable of you, M. le Comte," began Montbars, "to allow me——"

Here he stopped, for Adrienne had stepped forward. His eyes turned upon her face with an expression of astonishment so complete, so admirably assumed, that but for my secret knowledge of the truth, it would have convinced me without the shadow of a doubt that to meet her here had been the last of his thoughts.

"Mademoiselle!—Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible?"

His tone of overwhelming wonder, I must admit, intensified my dawning sense of revolt. A consummate comedian! . . . Yet, I was loath to blame too much. The man was playing, and that for a great prize; and he had to play a game of cunning. I believe her frank spirit felt the meanness, for she coloured deeply. And I loved her the more for it.

You could (in the cant phrase) have heard a pin drop in the great gallery. Had Montbars but glanced at the Comte du Ruffeleu's face, he would have known that he had failed at the first throw, and might have taken warning. But his gaze was riveted on her. Smiling, he went on:

"What good fortune is this! To meet, thus unexpectedly, thus strangely, Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu!"

She jerked up her head, and flung out her hand to him with a large, frank gesture.

"No, Loup-Cervier, call me Louvecelle! These are the names under which we knew each other. They are good names.—Cousin Gontran,"—it was with real dignity that she addressed her redoubtable relative,—"I have often spoken to you of those comrades of the West, whom I learned to know and esteem so well, in

the days when a few of us, so few—ah, you may say what you will—out of this great France, we went forth with loyal hearts and pure faith, to uphold the cause of our King. Among those comrades, I have mentioned the name of Loup-Cervier."

"Well said!" cried the doctor from his corner.

I could have fallen before her on my knees, so fine a creature did she stand revealed among that gathering of fribbles strong only in prejudice.

The Comte de Ruffeleu stood silent. I am sure the gallant fibre in him was stirred; and I have often thought since that if Montbars had been content to allow her to keep the leadership of the situation, events might well have taken a very different course. But he was too sure of himself. Every one has, at times, to pay toll for his very qualities.

"Pray, Louvecelle," he said, stepping closer—and, though his speech was ostensibly to her, it was really directed to his host, whom, I could see, he kept narrowly under his eye—"do not let it be imagined that I take it for granted that fortune of war carries claim in peace. I would not presume—I would not presume," he repeated the word with emphasis, "to trespass upon the hospitality of the Comte de Ruffeleu, except for the purpose for which it was extended to me. Mr. de Quercy"—he wheeled upon me with his brilliant smile—"I know you will forgive that, in a moment of overwhelming surprise, I should seem to have forgotten that purpose."

He extended his hand and grasped mine, with a warmth which made no betrayal of my own lack of response.

"Mr. de Quercy," he said again, "none the worse for yesterday. I am glad, sir. I thank you." He stopped; laughed and slightly stamped his foot. "I am such a confounded poor fellow at making speeches. *Pardi*, I believe the more I feel a thing, the less I can say it! I am perfectly convinced," he went on, addressing the Comte again—and if I thought him good actor before, I swear that now, he was unsurpassable

—"that Mr. de Quercy has never told you how heroically he behaved yesterday. He saved my life, as sure as I am a living man to-day. Saved my life, he an invalid! The wolf was on top of me—that monster! —bearing me down. Another second——"

He broke off. There was a dramatic pause, and then he proceeded in an altered voice:

"A man does not mind death in defence of a good cause, in good company. But to be strangled, in some unknown black hole, by a wild beast—for no good—just at this hour of my life——"

He halted and looked full at Adrienne. I am certain this was not in the programme; but youth and passion will trip up the strongest. Their eyes met.

She had grown very pale, and had drawn back from his advance. But, when his gaze now flamed upon her, the most obtuse could see the quick, irrepressible answer in her face.

Aged, broken man as he was, the Count saw. He made a stride forward, with a gesture that was almost that of an uplifted hand; and, placing himself between them, turned a searing stare upon the visitor.

Montbars, with a tilt of his head, stared back. For a perceptible moment, in a breathless silence, the two—the old and the young—faced each other.

I was amazed at the completeness and the suddenness with which Montbars flung off his carefully prepared panoply of pretence. But he was of those whose hot blood cannot brook the slightest suggestion of menace—and he was already thrown off his balance by that wave of love ardour. The eyes of the two challenged. Defiance passed swiftly into a kind of deadly antipathy, out of which sprang fury.

Fascinated, I looked from one to the other. Then I saw the awful wolf-like change come over the old man and—the sweat broke upon my forehead—I saw it repeated, mirrored as it were, upon the younger! As if they had been two savage beasts preparing to spring, their crests bristled at each other.

I think I was alone in the room to mark this. But

Roubilliac had a professional eye to the convulsion on his noble patient's features. He pushed his way forward and took him roundly by the arm.

"Did you not say, M. le Comte, that coffee would be in the library? You will forgive me for reminding you that cold coffee is no good for the digestion—and most of us have far to go."

The old man started violently. He seemed like one waking up from a painful dream. He made vague gestures of apology into space. One could see that, after the violent flare, his mind energies had sunk back below their normal: for the moment he looked almost senile. All that survived was the instinct, the lifelong habit of courtesy.

"Ah—a thousand pardons!" he stammered. "A thousand pardons! I was forgetting"—he struggled for words. "I forgot. I must not indeed neglect my own guests for—for——" He now sought Montbars' face, and there seemed to be no remembrance in his gaze. "Yes, this gentleman is Mr. de Quercy's visitor—his visitor. Quite so.—What do you say, doctor? Yes, they would probably like their coffee together here. Certainly. Certainly, Mr. de Quercy must consider himself at home here—this room is at his disposal."

He bowed gropingly in our direction, with a trembling salute of the hand. The doctor drew him by the arm towards the Marquise.

Still at grips as I was with a new idea that had suddenly danced into my brain (an idea so fantastic as to be almost grotesque), the background to this brief dumb drama—the murmured comments; the rustling, the whispers and shoulder-shrugs, the smiles and frowns —had been dimly present to my consciousness. I heard, in retrospect, so to speak, the deprecating, nervous little coughs of the Abbé, the doctor's quick breathing and his gasped "Ah, bahs!" the Marquise's peevish voice ordering her husband to demand the carriage.

The old lady now made the same observation to her host as he approached her:

"I really think, M. de Ruffeleu, that it is high time we should take our departure."

Her spite failed to reach him. I do not think he even heard. If the gesture with which he offered his arm was mechanical, his air was sufficiently imposing; she took it without another word and hobbled meekly beside him.

As in a maze I saw the procession begin to form itself solemnly into pairs and move away in the order in which it had already twice progressed.

"Perhaps this time, mademoiselle," said the Vicomte de Montauban, approaching, "you will allow me the honour——"

He crooked his arm, bowed from the waist; his lips bore that odious heart-shaped smile. If ever there was a "face for a slap"—expressive French term!—his was that, without a doubt.

"Thanks for your amiability," retorted she coolly. "I have to see that these gentlemen are served to coffee. It is my duty to do the honours of Castel-Rozac, while my cousin is elsewhere employed."

"Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu remains with us, sir," said Montbars decisively, stepping forward with a high mien that was in itself a provocation; the Vicomte incontinently stepped back.

It was plain that my reckless friend was determined to burn his ships. The expression on Montauban's face, as he bowed again and turned on his heel, spelt danger. Roubilliac flung an expressive look after him and then back at me. I saw he had the same idea. Acting, however, comes naturally to most Frenchmen; he gave his great laugh, and anyone would have sworn he had not a reservation in his thoughts.

"*Parbleu!*" he cried—"I remain here too! Have I not said I yearned to shake hands with M. Montbars?—Tell them so, within there," he called after the Vicomte, "that these things do happen, sometimes, and here's an instance!"

The moment, however, the door was closed, the whole expression of his face changed to gravity. He

came quickly to where the beautiful pair stood side by side.

"I have sworn," he said, "to shake you by the hand, and I do so." He suited the action to the words. "Deliverer of that poor Lavalette—I am proud!"

"*Caspita!*—Lavalette?" The exclamation broke from Montbars, an explosion of surprise. It seemed to be Spanish that sprang to his lips most readily when he was taken unawares. "How? What's that?" His eyes moved from side to side, with the feline alertness I had already noticed in him. For one second he appeared to be weighing the possibility of denial, and the next to toss it away. "So, that has come out, has it!—Well, *nargue!*" he gave a defiant laugh.

"Yes, it has come out," said the doctor. "It is known, and"—he jerked his big thumb towards the door—"that kind of ape, just gone from the room, is the fellow who has brought the news. And if you'll believe me, you'll not give him longer than you can help to make the most of his knowledge."

"Ah, Loup-Cervier!" said Adrienne, "what have you done?" Her voice had a lovely note I had never before heard in it—deep, tragic, tender!

He seemed to hesitate in his thoughts. But soon his restless glance steadied itself. He braced his splendid figure, drew a long breath and looked round him with his conquering air.

"I do not think they'll denounce me from this house. And, at the swiftest, in these wilds, I can in any case still allow myself a couple of days. Yes," he re-affirmed, "a couple of days. I will not let myself be hurried; no, by the Lord! I am too well here! Louvecelle——"

He flung his arm about her. It was deliberately done. And she permitted it, only drawing herself back sufficiently within his grasp to look up earnestly at his face.

"My new friend, I do not know your name," said Montbars; "and you, Quercy, my already old friend"—he looked at me charmingly—"she and I were comrades, you have heard her proclaim it. We are now—lovers!"

"We are betrothed," said she, in her grave voice.

"We are betrothed," he repeated, looking down into her eyes. And they kissed.

It was a beautiful, spontaneous, an irresistible movement. And, reserved Englishman as I was, it did not shock me. Nay, I felt my heart, out of its own pain, yearn towards them. Louvecelle had found her only mate. . . .

As for Roubilliac, he was delighted, touched in all his French sensibilities. He laughed; blew his nose; and then openly wiped his eye.

"*Cré bleu*, you two! You're mad, the pair of you! Mad as poets! But, my faith, it does me good! So, there are still, it would seem, in our poor old France, people with real blood in their veins! Yes, I like to see you; but in the name of reason, young people, what do you expect? What do you mean to do? Here is a fine piece of work toward, upon my word!"

Adrienne slowly disengaged herself. She was pale; and her eyes shone dark, as she gazed reproachfully at her lover.

"Did you not remember that your life was mine?—that only one thing matters now? Why did you endanger our happiness with this folly?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Why? Because I could not resist it, Louvecelle. The blood in my veins, as this gentleman has it. It was such a shame—that innocent fine fellow! I saw the chance."

I understood his meaning as perhaps even she never could. It was the sporting impulse—the lure of danger, the readiness to risk all, the zest of fair play. I loved the man; but, as the doctor said, what was to be done?

My fantastic thought recurred to me, more insistent. A mad thought, of course; the freak of my over-excited imagination! And yet it fascinated me, drove me. . . . What a solution!

I measured Montbars with a new standard. . . . Yes, the right age. . . . Noble enough, certainly, if looks went for anything, to have sprung from the loins of

such an one as the Lord of Ruffeleu. . . . Dark enough, and passionate enough, to have claimed for mother the lady of the portrait. . . .

The portrait! it hung just behind me. I turned and looked at its concealing curtain. And a new thought, born of the first, sprang up in my mind. That vindictive woman, there veiled from sight, had she not, in the letter Adrienne had read to me, taunted the father with the hint that the unknown heir of his home was like soon to be in the neighbourhood? . . . Could it be that Montbars knew? . . . He was actor enough to have played any part. . . . Yet the motive for his visit here lacked plausibility. . . . Did he know? Did he not? . . . If he did not, and I were to draw back that curtain . . . and if he were indeed to recognize his mother, what then?

I felt sure that I, on the alert, could not be deceived; that I could see if the surprise was real or feigned. If, by the most inconceivable chain of coincidences, Montbars the adventurer should prove the missing heir—himself unaware of the fact—why, what a solution, indeed! The thought again leaped through my brain; and the desire to know became overpowering.

I deliberately put out my hand and drew back the curtain.

CHAPTER XIV

THE VEILED PORTRAIT

THE rings scraped stridently along the rod. At the sound, Adrienne and Roubilliac exclaimed almost together:

"Mr. de Quercy! What are you doing?"

"Are you going mad in your turn, young man?"

Montbars said nothing, but looked round curiously. I heard him give a gasp, saw him start violently. For one second he stood rigid: blasted with astonishment. Then he took a step backwards and, fetching a deep breath, closed his eyes, tightly, with a frown. After a moment, he bent his head forward to examine the picture afresh with the profoundest concentration. And here at last, a cry leaped from him:

"My mother!" His gaze sought us, each in turn. "What—what is the meaning of this? My mother—or I have lost my senses! What is my mother's portrait doing here, here at Castel-Rozac?"

He passed his hand over his forehead, and gave a stamp of his heel; then, leaning forward again, supporting himself on the console to stare yet closer at the painting.

"My mother, I say!" he repeated. "Young—younger, of course, but not so different from what she is still. No other woman in the world has those eyes, those eyebrows—that twist of the mouth! Why, why, the jewel round her neck—I know the very jewel! But those lips, the smile—no, no other woman ever had that smile, the smile that chilled me always, child and man. What is the meaning——"

He checked himself and stepped back again. His olive faced was suffused with red. Adrienne, her hands behind her back, stood still, very pale. She had uttered no sound, scarce made a movement. But the look she fixed upon her lover was suddenly haggard. I, myself, felt scarce able to breathe, petrified by the completeness of my success.

The doctor, however, kept all his wits about him. He went up to Montbars, and after peering intently into his face, stretched out a hand and laid it on his heart. Montbars drew away with a petulant movement.

"Forgive me," said Roubilliac. "I am a doctor, you know. You seemed so upset—I feared shock. A dear mother?—a mother lost, perhaps, lately? Some striking likeness. . . ."

"Likeness!" Montbars interrupted savagely. "Likeness? I should think so! The likeness of the portrait to the sitter. And dear? Oh yes, dear!" He had an indescribable sneer. "All mothers are dear, of course!"

He made a sweep with his arm, as if forcibly putting some thought aside.

"Will nobody," he went on, "answer a plain question? How comes the portrait of my mother here? Louvecelle, Louvecelle, in God's name, why don't you speak?"

She drew near him; her eyes were searching his face with an expression that I had never seen in them—to me inscrutable.

"Monsieur Montbars," she said formally, her voice, too, was curiously unlike her usual tone, "you are under some extraordinary misapprehension. The portrait of the Comtesse de Ruffeleu finds its proper place at Castel-Rozac, by the side of the Comte, her husband."

He gave a new cry of wild surprise.

"Comtesse de——! No, this is enough to turn one idiotic! *Maman*, Comtesse de Ruffeleu?" He burst into a loud laugh. Then anger flashed from the gaze still fixed upon the picture. "But, why veiled? Why screened from the rest of the noble assembly?

Anything irregular? Or is it possible that even the great name of Ruffeleu-Rozac does not suffice to cover up the roture of a Montbars? How long ago did this inconceivable misalliance of the Comte de Ruffeleu with Madame Montbars take place? It did not last long, evidently. When did it take place? You must forgive my ignorance of the wonderful event: my dear mother is a singular, a secret woman.—Strange, strange!"

"Monsieur Montbars," said Adrienne again—and now he noticed her changed address: he made a movement of surprise, his whole frame seeming to question—"Loup-Cervier," she corrected herself, with a falling away from the harshness of her accent, "it appears necessary to inform you that the Comtesse de Ruffeleu was a Mademoiselle de Kerguelen, when she married my cousin, in the year 1790. Therefore she never could have been Madame Montbars."

"Thousand thunders," ejaculated the doctor, and slapped his thigh. "What a turn of affairs!"

There fell a silence.

With lips apart, eyes starting, Montbars stood as though trying to cope with an inconceivable thought. From the courtyard below, clapping of hoofs and rumbling of wheels announced the assembling of the carriages of Castel-Rozac's Sunday guests. Adrienne turned her intent gaze from his face to mine, and back again. I saw her flush and grow pale, as with alternate waves of feeling; she bit her lip and frowned; and then, suddenly, she bore down upon me, with a swoop like a striking hawk.

"Mr. de Quercy! you have been talking. Admit it! You have been gossiping about the private affairs of Rozac—gossiping, to the first acquaintance of the road!"

"I——!"

It is impossible for me to describe the turmoil of hurt feelings and anger which, under that onslaught, took possession of me. There came a trembling change on her face; she caught me by the wrist. Her touch was cold as ice.

"Mr. de Quercy," she panted, "as an English gentleman, what have you told M. Montbars?"

I gave her an English answer, harshly enough:

"Nothing!"

"Your word of honour?"

"Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu"—I was furious—"you ask me if I have betrayed your confidence. I reply: No. There is nothing more to say."

Instantly I saw the shadow swept from her eyes. The drawn look that had altered, aged her, gave place to a lovely softening. She had never a thought of excusing herself to me; but, with all her heart aglow, turned to her lover. Clearly, that she could have doubted him was, for the moment, an emotion greater than any the amazing discovery could bring. So are women made!

"Ah—Loup-Cervier!" she said. And it was once more the deep sound of music.

He took the hand she extended to him; but it was evident that unlike her, brain dominated heart. His brilliant eyes were indeed bent upon her; but they were contemplating far distant scenes. His brows were knotted in reflection. I felt sure that he was collecting all the evidence of his own past in support of the new astounding possibility.—She lifted his hand to her lips.

"Why did you pretend to be so suprised to see me, when you entered the room?" she said, tremulously.

He seemed neither to hear nor to feel. Still holding her fingers, he turned his gaze once more on the picture and began arguing with himself, wonderingly, half aloud. All the while Roubilliac, with head bent, mechanically playing with the seals at his fob, regarded him attentively, as if absorbed in the bedside diagnosis of some thrilling complications.

"Could I be mistaken?" Montbars was murmuring. "Could it be possible that I should make such a mad mistake? The portrait of another? Do such resemblances exist?" Then aloud: "What has become of that lady? Ah—dead?—a veil of mourning."

"The picture was veiled," said Adrienne, hesitatingly,

as if choosing her words, "when Cousin Gontran's wife left him—after barely three years of married life."

"Left him?"

"Yes. He has never seen her since."

"She died?"

"No, Loup-Cervier. She lives still."

A slow, faint smile began to flicker on Montbars' lips.

"That poor Comte de Ruffeleu!" His tone was sardonic. "So beautiful a consort, to leave him thus! And, apparently, without an heir—to leave him with the first duty of a wife in highborn circles still unaccomplished!"

I saw Adrienne grip tight on the hand she held. Then she said—I do not know if it was with a returning doubt of his sincerity:

"There was a child—she took the child away with her."

Montbars drew himself up with a jerk, and dropped her hand. Then, in a colourless voice, without movement save of the lips:

"That child—a boy?"

"Yes," answered she.

There fell a moment's tense silence. Montbars, folding his arms, took two paces backwards and contemplated the portrait from another aspect.

"A boy, of course! A boy of two, or thereabouts. And poor M. de Ruffeleu left high and dry—wifeless—heirless!"

He walked up to the picture again; once more leaned both arms on the console and gazed at the canvas with a derisive air.

"Oh, *Maman, Maman!* So you hated that poor man as much as you have always hated your son, his son! My word! what a woman you are! How complete your revenge, for whatever it may have been! Father, son—both! Oh, how like you, Madame Montbars, *Madame veuve* Montbars!"

He seemed to have forgotten our presence. Adrienne was about to draw near him again: Roubilliac

arrested her with a peremptory gesture. Montbars, however, wheeled instantly round: he was the alertest creature I have ever met. And when his glance fell upon the girl, the hard cruel mirth, that was like the play of lightning upon a dark sky, went out of his face. He courted her for an instant with ardent eyes, and then spoke:

"Louvecelle! I thought it sweet to call you by that name, and there are a hundred other names, all sweet, that you have given me the right to call you by. But I never thought that I should be able to say to you, 'Dear cousin!'"

He sought her hand again, and drew her gently with him towards the portrait.

"Upon honour, I have had a few strange happenings in my life, but of all the sensations this is the most incredible!" He looked from the canvas to the doctor, and then to me. A great gravity had fallen upon him. "Whatever the story of that lady may be," he went on, "as true as I stand here, I stand before my mother's picture."

Roubilliac drew a noisy breath and exploded:

"Thousand thunders! He thinks he is the missing heir! The missing heir, my word!"

"Ah, doctor!" cried Adrienne. "Ah, Fabien—but no, that is not your name. My God—poor Cousin Gontran! What happiness for us all! But why do we stand here? Let us not lose a moment!"

"Gently, gently, my child," interposed Roubilliac. "Ah, for that, no, look you! Stay quiet, every one. Nothing of the sort. Not a word, not a whisper to the Comte. Ah, and that reminds me."

He pushed us right and left, stretched forth a decided hand and drew back the curtain over the picture. This precaution taken, he faced us once more sturdily in his characteristically Gallic attitude, thumbs thrust into his waistcoat pockets.

"First of all, proof, my friends! There must be proof. What I believe; what you believe, Mademoiselle; or you, my young jail conspirator, is not what

matters. It is worth just nothing. Proof! Until the most irrefutable, conclusive proof can be laid before him, it would be folly, I say and I insist, it would be a crime to breathe even a hint of this business to the Comte de Ruffeleu."

Montbars had now an angry frown. The doctor's touch had been rough. The doctor's tone was overbearing. It was enough to stir that fierce blood.

"Proof?" he echoed. "Do you mean, do you insinuate—do you dare to think——"

"Ta—ta—ta—ta! young man, be quiet, I say! Don't run away with the bit between your teeth in that manner. And you too, my little one—pardon, I should say Mademoiselle—do not make such angry eyes at me! I am not speaking of my own opinion: I'll get to that later. Come, come! This is a situation which must be met with a little common-sense. Reflect just one moment. Look at the story as it stands. A pretty story, faith, to set before sane people! My old patient here may be a little touched in a corner of his head, poor gentleman, but he has sensible folk behind him. Consider, I say. There you are, you two young men—for anything anybody may know about you, a pair of young scamps off the highroad. Off the highroad, I say, both of you, you tumble into this house. And between you, you have got hold of its secret. Mr. de Quercy, you know how you got hold of it but too well! Very good—let me speak! Then both of you contrive to scrape up an acquaintance with the most out-and-out set of ruffians in the country. No easy matter—yet you did it! And the next thing is that our young Englishman has a wonderful tale of your prowess, M. Montbars, to relate at his host's table. My faith, what a tale! And, before the story is well finished, M. Montbars—who, as a parenthesis, is wanted by M. Fouché—M. Montbars in person walks in! Quite accidentally. The ground well prepared—— Peace, my young deliverer of persecuted captives! Let me finish. He recognizes, to his amazement—great God, what amazement—Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu. Touching scene between old

comrades ; it quite took me in, upon my word—until, half an hour later, it all comes out ! 'We are betrothed !' Betrothed, no less. 'Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu. Is it possible !' "

He mimicked Montbars's exquisite piece of acting in the most absurd falsetto, and laughed homerically when that young man stamped his foot.

"Ahaha ! and, to complete the bouquet, suddenly, without rhyme or reason, M. de Quercy pulls me that curtain. His friend, of course, stares ; he staggers. 'My mother !' Now come, young people, never tell me this is a story that would stand up one single minute before the eyes of a lawyer ? "

I confess I was choking with rage.

"M. Roubilliac——!" I began.

But Montbars intervened. He had recovered his self-control. Give it but time, his strong head always got the mastery of his hot blood.

"Yes—— By the way, Quercy," he said quietly, "what, in the name of all that is queer, made you pull back that curtain ?"

I answered him, straightway, without pausing to consider how mad my words might sound :

"Because of the wolf-look."

"The wolf-look !" they all echoed.

"Yes," I explained, now stammering and flushing ; "I saw it in you: The Comte gets it when he is in a rage. His hair bristles. You had it too ; I saw it suddenly, that moment when you stood facing each other, both so angry. You both had it. Your hair stood up, like a wild beast's ! And you had it again just now, when you turned on M. Roubilliac. Louradour was right when he said all the Ruffeleus have it."

"*Caramba !*" Montbars stared, and put his hand to the top of his thick wave of hair. "Wolf-look you call it ?" He stopped short, and his face changed. "The devil !—poor old gentleman. And so that is my dad ? Cannot say I took much to him ! And, by the Lord," his eyes widening, rueful and yet humorous, upon the doctor, "dad certainly did not take to me.

Talk of the voice of blood! If ever I saw hate in a man's face. The wolf-look, I got it with a vengeance!" He laughed: it was the same hard, cold, mirthless laugh as when he had apostrophized his mother's picture. "It seems an odd kind of curse for a fellow to be hated by both his parents. Great God, how my mother hates me!"

"Oh, my friend!" murmured Adrienne. And I thought that there was little I would not have endured just to hear that golden voice of the Louvecelle pour forth on me such balm as was held in those three words.

"Yes, yes, hates me," cried Montbars. He began to move excitedly to and fro before the veiled picture. "You would never believe, any of you, the fantastic vindictiveness of that secret hatred, unless you had known her."

"Well—we do, as a matter of fact, happen to know something of her capacity in that line," muttered Roubilliac. But the other proceeded, unheeding:

"From my childhood, there were times when I knew she loathed me. People make all manner of pretty phrases, sentimental verses, about a mother's love, prayers at a mother's knee," he sneered. "Prayers at my mother's knee—oh, mine was a pious childhood! She took care of me, of my body, I'll say that for her. She meant me to live, right enough. But there was hell hidden in my home; and why I did not grow into a young monster, and out of it into a full devil, is more than I can tell!" He waved his hand before the purple curtain. "Upon honour, I have more than once thought that that woman, my mother, wanted me to grow vile, to grow evil, criminal. She's mad, mad, of course, I see it now."

"No," cried Adrienne in a ringing voice, "not mad. Evil herself! And you are right, she wanted you to be evil too. You were to be the instrument of her vengeance. She wanted to punish the man who had offended her. Not enough to carry away his heir, but to hide you so cunningly that all search was baffled—

not enough to taunt the wretched father, year by year: 'Your son is alive. You shall never see him.' No, she wanted worse, I begin to understand it now. She wanted to bring shame, disgrace upon you; then reveal you at last: that was to be her crowning blow!"

Montbars broke in, with a choking exclamation. I saw him clench his teeth till the jawbone showed white under the dark skin. He struck the marble of the console with his balled fist.

"By heaven! she is capable of having betrayed me to Fouché!"

"Did she know?" whispered Adrienne.

"She always seemed to know wherever I was. And I write to her sometimes. Sometimes I have to write to her for money. When the caprice takes her, she can be lavish enough. I believe her very rich—though she lives so hidden away. Yes, I write to her. Good God, the only creature I have on earth, after all, belonging to me! She writes to me too, sometimes. I heard from her only this morning."

He smiled bitterly, and drew a letter from his breast-pocket. Adrienne snatched it.

"Her writing! It is her writing, her very writing!" she called out triumphantly. "Oh, Roubilliac, you who would doubt!"

"I?—doubt?" said the doctor slowly. "That is just where you are mistaken, my child." He gently took the sheet from her hand. "May I cast an eye upon that document, Monsieur Montbars—as it will be safer to continue calling you, just for the present? I confess I am curious."

Montbars sketched an arrogant gesture of denial. Roubilliac however, with a shrewd look, went on good-humouredly:

"You are not as much on the spot as I thought, my young friend."

He retained a firm hold of the letter, but without looking at it; and Montbars, after a moment of frowning reflection, withdrew his protesting hand, and folded his arms. The movement was acquiescent: Roubilliac,

without further ado, proceeded to read, half-aloud, commenting as he went.

"'*Elm Lodge, Hedge Lane, Barnet.*'—Now, here is life's doing for you! Only an hour ago, M. de Ruffeleu would have given half his fortune, and half his poor old blood, to have had this address. Now it is of no use to any of us! '*Fabien*'—Ah, bah! and you who were baptized Enguerrand! where did she unearth the Fabien, that and her Montbars? '*Fabien.*' As you say, not much tenderness wasted here! '*I have received your letter. I am glad to hear you have a promising affair in hand. You ask me for a loan to tide you over the enterprise. No, I will not send you any money. Make some for yourself. Are you not intelligent, and is this not a world of fools? Sylvia Montbars.*' Sylvia! Ah-ha, I like that Sylvia. It matches the Fabien!" He refolded the sheet and handed it back. "Thank you, sir. Your mother has a style of her own: I would swear to the Comtesse de Ruffeleu on that count alone, without the testimony of the handwriting. But the writing is conclusive. I congratulate you. It may, when the time comes, save you some difficulty. And, faith, it please me that she should, after her hitherto so successful revenge, bear witness for you herself, after all."

"I am glad to see you are satisfied, at last," said Montbars coldly.

"Satisfied? At last? My good young man, as I had the honour of saying just now to Mademoiselle, I had not a doubt. Not, mark you, that I might not very well have thought you were all engaged upon a fine bit of mumming. But then, we medical men have our own way of finding out things. I have not been an army doctor for nothing. A man may sham every disease, but only to a certain point. And the same with emotions. An actor may imitate stupefaction according to every rule of the art, but he cannot produce at will that contraction of the pupil which is the sign of a frantic effort of the mind. Did you not see

me peer into your eyes? And that moisture on your temples—the greatest actor alive, Talma himself, to save his fame, could not have forced that out of his pores! And my hand on your heart? No man can sham that heavy slow beat. Ah, and a good thing for him too!"

Roubilliac paused, triumphant, with his familiar gesture of thumbs thrust into waistcoat pockets. But Montbars looked blackly back. He evidently regarded this anatomical investigation of his sincerity as a liberty. I saw him make an odd movement, as though brushing away the resented touch upon his chest.

Roubilliac, whether unnoticing or indifferent, went on in a ruminating tone:

"I am convinced. We are all convinced. But it remains a devil of a ticklish business. The old gentleman, as you have seen for yourself, has—not a doubt of it—taken a twist against you. It would have been dangerous enough to burst the astounding news upon him anyhow. But, as matters stand between you two"—he scratched his chin thoughtfully—"it would be as good as hitting him on the head. We should have him down with another stroke, as sure as fate. He is shaping for one. Did not know what he was doing when I drew him away from you. Oh yes, there are troubles ahead."

"Troubles?" echoed Adrienne.

"Troubles," said Roubilliac roundly. "Yes—thick as crows. Here, on the one hand, my children, is a situation which demands patience, prudence, the most careful and gradual procedure; and there, on the other hand, stands Monsieur le Vicomte Enguerrand de Ruffeleu (you see, I make no bones to call him by his name, for once) responsible for the deeds of one M. Montbars, whom M. Fouché is set upon laying by the heels! Now, M. Montbars must make a bolt of it, and the sooner the wiser."

"Oh, Roubilliac!" cried Adrienne, coming forward. —I had not thought it in her, to reveal herself so womanly, so tender and plaintive. "Oh, how terrible

that—that my cousin should be hated at first sight by his own father! How terrible that, just when we have found him, he should be forced to fly!"

"And from considerable danger," said the doctor, ruthlessly. "Yonder pest of a Montauban means mischief, or my name is not Nicolas Roubilliac. He has just made off. I heard the trot of his curricle. And, by the way, I must be off myself—I nearly forgot Mother Mérindol, who is in trouble with her fifth, at Millac. Now—what if I were to give you a lift thither, young man? You will have time to make up your pack and begone."

I heard Louvecelle catch her breath. Loup-Cervier gave her a swift glance, then dropped his eyes and stood, his finger tips to his lips, his brow bent, meditating.

"Thank you, doctor," he said at last, in friendly tones, but with great firmness. "I am singularly obliged for your offer, but I cannot avail myself of it."

The doctor frowned in his turn. "I cannot reconcile it with my duty to my old patient," he urged, "to leave you here."

"Reassure yourself," said Montbars blandly, though I think he was at heart angry again. "I am about instantly to take my departure."

"You will not, I suppose," cried Adrienne, with a rent in her voice, "grudge us a few words at parting?"

She had grown very pale, and her eyes looked suddenly dark and deep and tragic.

The doctor measured her a moment with a whimsical, not unkind look, shrugged his shoulders, and muttering that he would call back again in the evening to see how the land lay, stumped out of the room. He was completely taken in. Her air of anguish vouched for the sincerity of her words. I, however, though her desperation was plain to see, felt that Louvecelle was not the woman to let her lover go from her so easily. And it was no surprise to me to see her, the instant the door closed, seize him by the arm and to hear her exclaim:

"Let us go! Let us go, this moment!"

He took her in his fierce embrace. "Charles, his friend," either forgotten or ignored, stared out of the window, with a throbbing heart. How she must love him that she should have stooped to falsehood for his sake!

"You will come, then, at last?" Montbars' voice was hoarse, yet triumphant.

"Since you are in danger——" she made answer. "Ah, do you not understand, my beloved? I would not go away with you in secret before. I would have you come into this house, and make yourself known to my cousin, and ask boldly for the comrade you had learned to love. Then, if the answer had been no—I would not have cared: I am of age; Cousin Gontran has authority over me no longer. I have always been loyal before God and man. I have always walked straight. I would have kept loyal and straight still in choosing you, thus, openly. But now—now all is changed. You are in danger. You are in danger," she repeated: "I shall go with you, to-night."

"By the Lord, you are glorious! Now I fear nothing—now I know I shall succeed. Yes, yes—you shall come away with me. Yet, not to-night. I must have another day."

"The last carriage has driven off," said I from the window, warningly, without turning my head.

"Mr. de Quercy is right: Cousin Gontran may return here any moment. Go, go, dear love! Wait for me, at the old place. But the time to get my cloak, I will slip out and rejoin you."

CHAPTER XV

PORTENTS AND FOREBODINGS

THE library was our usual meeting-place before dinner: the most mellow, the only really habitable room in the whole sad, stately place. When I came down—a few minutes late, for I had set myself to the task of correspondence, to fill up the lonely hours, and had become absorbed in it—I found the room empty for the first time.

Usually the spare figure of the old Comte—ever courteous in punctuality—would detach itself from the hearth and advance to welcome me with a little friendly gesture. I missed it to-day. As for La Louvecelle, she was always late, and would come swinging in upon us, her hound at her side, bringing the sunshine, the fresh breeze and the beauty of life into the stagnant melancholy of the atmosphere.

The few minutes of solitude seemed to me strangely long. I had a yearning, after my lonely afternoon, to be again in the company of those with whose life drama I was now so curiously intermingled. The doctor had come, and gone again, I knew, for I had heard the heavy trot of his horse, and caught a burst of his voice in the courtyard. I wondered what was happening, and felt unreasonably wounded, exasperated, to be held even for a while in ignorance. There was about the house a sense of events impending, or actually taking place. I found myself listening with painful anxiety for the sound either of the Comte's feeble tread, or of Diana's light footfalls; and I felt an apprehension, which became almost an anguish, lest I should never hear again that last sound—lest she might have gone

with her lover, without a last word to me, a handclasp or even a farewell look.

When the door opened and Louradour, from the threshold, announced sepulchrally: "His honour is served," my heart stood still. I felt myself turn pale.

"How—what?" I stammered.

Louradour cleared his throat. He looked sad and anxious; but his office was so far blessed to him that I believe he would have found a melancholy enjoyment even in a funeral feast.

"Monseigneur is indisposed," he said. "M. le docteur has ordered the utmost tranquillity—oh, the utmost! He is to be kept, as M. le docteur remarked to me in parting, 'he is to be kept, my brave Louradour, as tranquil as an *accouchée*.'"

The major-domo paused to let the full import of this remarkable statement filter through. Then he proceeded.

"Mademoiselle, she is being served in her apartment."

I gave an exclamation which Louradour apparently misinterpreted, for he went on, if possible more consequentially:

"Mr. de Quercy will understand that the proprieties demand that Mademoiselle should do so, in the circumstances." Then he added, with a sudden drop to anti-climax: "Mademoiselle begs to inform Mr. de Quercy that she will pour him a cup of coffee, after supper, here in the library."

There was consolation in that. But the more immediate prospect was not pleasant—a meal alone, in the bleak dining-hall, with its echoing floors, its sighing arras, its intolerable vastness. . . . Here, in the book-enclosed friendly spaces, the fire was desperately inviting. "For heaven's sake," it was on the tip of my tongue to cry out, "give me a crust of bread and a glass of wine by the hearth, here!" But I saw Louradour range himself aside to let me pass; saw him motion towards the dining-hall with as much magnificence of gesture as if I had been a whole dinner-party—and I had not the heart to dash him.

The chill and the emptiness seized me with a more over-mastering depression than even on the occasion of my first meal there. I was glad the Comte's wine was so good—I wanted cheering badly. Yet it was not so good as the Jurançon of the sinister Wolf-house! I was glad, too, when Louradour showed signs of passing from his professional dignity to the loquaciousness of his private hours. Yet, to-night, his discoursing was melancholy enough: the good fellow's spirits were weighed down by disquietude—Monseigneur was not himself this evening. No, Monseigneur (as Louradour had thought it his duty to impart to M. le docteur) was certainly not himself, either in body or in mind.

. . Monseigneur had positively wandered in his conversation. M. le docteur had not seemed to attach all the importance to this that he, Louradour, thought it demanded.

"That Monseigneur," insisted the good fellow, "should wander is, I cannot but think, a very bad symptom, a very bad symptom. So magnificent a head! Ah! it is a sorrowful thing for one who, like myself, has known the splendour of that intellect! But it is the trouble that has done it. The trouble Mr. de Quercy knows of. Ah, if Monsieur de Quercy had been indeed what we all thought him! It would have done so well!"

He paused, a smoking dish in his hand; gave me a sidelong look and shook his head regretfully:

"If Monsieur de Quercy does not partake of these truffled chestnuts," he went on, changing the subject with a sigh, "it is our good Coperneau who will be disappointed! *Châtaignes aux truffes*, with the veal collops—the best part of the dish, if your Honour will permit me the observation.—Coperneau," Louradour started afresh on the theme, as he refilled my glass, "poor Coperneau, he has almost a broken heart, these days. But for the Sunday *déjeuner* I hardly know how he would bear his life.—'So high a family,' he says to me, 'and so little scope of art!'—Yes, it is so. When M. le Comte has had his double broth and perhaps a

soft egg, he has dined. And as for Mademoiselle—ah, Mademoiselle is a great disappointment to Coperneau! Grapes, bread, a bit of cream cheese—if Mademoiselle has to order herself a meal, that is what she orders. 'She eats,' says Coperneau, fit to cry, 'she eats, but she never dines—she has no notion of things,' he says to me. 'And neither has the Englishman'—with all due respect to your honour. Ah, sir, have I not had actually to request you to consider the truffled chestnuts? Coperneau, well, it is his custom to survey the plates as they come down, and he notices with sorrow that you never mop up his sauces. 'Could I but find a sauce that would tickle the gentleman's palate!' he cries to me. And he will not listen to me when I tell him that in England there are no sauces. I have been in England. I have accompanied Monseigneur in his exile. No sauces. Am I not right? Only mustard."

Thus he babbled on. I hardly heard him. A nod, a grunt, was sufficient encouragement. Yet, as I say, I was glad enough to keep him there, in the gaunt loneliness. And, upon my word, I remember it now, the truffled chestnuts were uncommonly good. To hearten him I had a second helping.

I shortened the meal as much as I could in decency. My pulses throbbed in impatient anticipation of the promised meeting over the coffee. Needless to say, I only succeeded in imposing on myself an extra half-hour of solitude; unless, indeed, Brisco, whom I found somnolating by the fire, could be considered company. I paced to and fro; went to the door, there to listen with bent head for the sound of her approach; took up a book only to fling it down again. Ever and anon the hound would draw a profound sigh, which seemed to give expression to my own tedium.

At length—I was standing by the fire, lost in a fretful muse—her coming took me actually by surprise. Brisco reared his great head with ears pricked; I turned, and saw her in the doorway.

She came slowly across the room; paused and contemplated me thoughtfully. Over the grey gown in

which she had looked so comely that morning, she had flung a many-folded military cloak of dull blue. I guessed at once that it was a relic of the guerilla days. Her hair was tied carelessly with a black knot at the back of her head ; she looked then, for all the world, like some beautiful boy from the past century.

After a moment she advanced again. I opened my lips to greet her ; but her silent way abashed me, and I could find no word. In silence she picked up the earthenware coffee-pot from the warm corner in the wood-ashes where Louradour had artlessly placed it, and poured the fragrant stream into the cup that stood on a napkin-covered tray. . . . Strange how I remember these small things ! The French country-life of those days—I dare say it may be still the case now—was marked by a curious simplicity as compared with ours. The coffee-service used at Castel-Rozac would have seemed appropriate at a farmhouse ; but the coffee presented in it was drink for a prince ! She dropped gravely two lumps of sugar into the cup, and suddenly, as she handed it to me, the corners of her lips tilted up into her enchanting smile.

"Ah !" cried I, with suddenly enlightened heart. "I am still your good dog."

"You barked very well, to-day," she rejoined promptly ; and as she spoke, let herself fall into a chair by the hearth. Brisco yawned, and put his head upon her knee. She flung an arm about him.

"To be treated like a dog," I resumed, "is not always a misfortune."

"There are dogs and dogs, Mr. de Quercy."

"You spoke of a good, honest dog—the words were meant for me, were they not ?"

"Yes, sir. A good, honest dog. An excellent true friend. A gallant comrade. I thank you, in my own name, and in that of"—her voice deepened exquisitely—"of my cousin."

And, on this, she held out her frank hand. I put mine in it. I had inwardly an absurd longing to go down on my knees ; to lay my head on her lap—like

Brisco—and beg her to treat me, just once, as her dog! But a score of conventions, inherited reserves, and an innate shyness kept me stiff, almost dumb. I took up my coffee-cup and inanely turned the spoon round and round.

She did not even perceive how little I had risen to the situation. She had not enough thought of me to mock me! She sat gazing into the leaping firelight. Her face had a new aspect for me—she seemed older, stronger; and yet, oddly, more womanly, more tender. I spoke at last, in a low voice:

"I ask no more—than to serve you."

Her brilliant eyes flashed a searching upward glance at me.

"I know," she said slowly. "I will remind you of that."

Then, pushing Brisco's weight from her and clasping her hands round her knees, she went on, fixing the blaze once more, and I knew she was not so much speaking as thinking aloud:

"They say that this Vidocq, the police agent, is like a spider: he has a hundred eyes, and a web spread at every corner. What would be best, now—to try for the Spanish frontier—or by sea, to England?"

I sat down in my turn, and drew my chair closer to her.

"Either goal," I said consolingly, "can easily be reached. M. Montbars—your cousin I ought to say—is a man evidently inured to adventurous ways. He speaks English fluently; and Spanish, I have reason to think, equally well. His main difficulty will lie in this immediate neighbourhood, where he must be a well-known figure by this time. But he has an admirable eye for country. All he has to do is to keep to by-paths, avoid the high-road and every centre where he is likely to meet with official inquisition—to travel, perhaps, only by night——"

I broke off, and felt myself grow scarlet, as I remembered that the hunted man would have a companion.

She did not take me up. Her face was set in that look of concentration it had worn that golden afternoon on the terrace, when, with the air of a Greek sybil, she sat plotting the plausible "fortuitous" meeting between me and her lover. Suddenly, with one of her swift changes of mood, she broke into a clear laugh; and, running me up and down with taunting eyes, exclaimed:

"You yourself will do well, it occurs to me, Mr. de Quercy, to remain at Castel-Rozac till the hue and cry set going by M. Fouché has subsided. It will not be safe for any handsome dark young man to be met wandering mysteriously up and down the country, with no better reason to give than his love of old stones!"

"Do not," cried I sarcastically—stung by her eternal mockery—"let my fate add to your anxieties! My country knows how to protect its sons, even on foreign soil. The drawer of the bureau in my room holds at this moment a document with which I can beard the most zealous of M. Fouché's police."

"Document?" she echoed, knitting her brow on me with an intent look.

"Only my passport, Mademoiselle; nothing more remarkable or out of the way, but, nevertheless, more than sufficient. Did you not yourself," I pursued, "scrutinize it, and pass it as satisfactory, on our first encounter? But, of course," here I relapsed into bitterness, "I cannot expect you to remember any such trifle connected with my insignificant self!"

"Ah, but I do remember!" she said, breaking into gay laughter. "I remember very well—and, let me tell you in passing, I will not allow my dog to growl at me in that manner. Yes, I remember; and, in proof of it——" she stopped and measured me with a gaze which, although her lips still smiled, once again deepened thoughtfully. "Height, a little above medium; shoulders broad; complexion dark; hair black; eyes black; mouth, ordinary, nose ordinary——"

Laughter seized upon her again, as she recited the inane personal description which the Paris officials had

added, according to French custom, to the stately English testimony of my character.

"Did it not run like that?" she resumed. "Nay, if you had stared as you do now, Mr. de Quercy, something more pointed would have been added to the portrait: 'Orbs unduly protruded; expression sinister.' Come, come, let me repeat, I will not allow my dog to growl at me." She got up. "I never asked you if you would have another cup. No? Why then, my sole excuse for lingering here vanishes. I cannot violate social *convenances*—beyond a certain point."

"Surely," said I, and in spite of her admonition, growling resentment was certainly audible in my voice, "since I only rank with Master Brisco——!"

"Rank with Brisco! You flatter yourself, Mr. de Quercy. My old Brisco, whom I love, who loves me, who would die for me——!"

"And would I not?" The words escaped me; I paused a moment, and then: "Fool that I am!" I exclaimed angrily.

"Ah no," she said, "do not say that!" Again she held out her hand to me. "Do not think, for all my nonsense, that I do not truly value your—your devotion. I do," she said earnestly. "I do, and will lay claim on that devotion, never fear."

I could find no answer except to raise her hand to my lips. . . . Ah, the hand of Louvecelle—what blows it dealt me! . . . and yet, the ecstasy of its touch! That moment when it lingered in my grasp and returned my pressure is perhaps the sweetest memory in my life.

She left me then; walking out of the room, her head bent; a little sad, I thought; reflective. Brisco padded his way after her with a slow roll of his great sides. When I could no longer hear the sound of their retreating steps, I closed the door and returned to my pensive hearth. She had not been able, I told myself, to maintain so complete an indifference towards me but that she had been touched by the self-abnegation of my attachment. . . . "I will lay claim on that devotion

again," had she said. Little did I guess how soon, and in what strange direction.

The first hint of my lady's intentions was given me during the *déjeuner* on the morrow. A quiet morning had passed, after the extraordinary agitations of the previous day. Roubilliac had called again. He had pronounced the Comte's condition satisfactory so far; but had enjoined a continuance of the most absolute rest. He remained for the midday meal; and none could have guessed, listening to the animated talk between him and La Louvecelle, that the girl was planning as desperate a venture as ever sprang out of the folly of a woman's heart; and that the family friend shared in her secret and was conscious, moreover, that the fortunes of the house trembled in the balance. I, however, was not at the height of so much self-control. I ate little and contributed practically nothing to the conversation.

"Did anyone ever see so long a face!" said Roubilliac, suddenly rallying me on my depressed attitude. "That is what comes of invalids overstepping their doctor's order—starting off to play Red Ridinghood to the wolf in Langévol woods."

"Old man Giscourt representing the Granny, I suppose," said I with a feeble attempt at sprightliness.

"Do not scold him, doctor," said Adrienne. "I am going to take him for a little quiet drive this afternoon. That will be an excellent way of giving him air, without fatigue, will it not?"

I looked up quickly at her, a whirlpool of conflicting thoughts setting my wits a-spin. What did she mean? . . . Could it be possible? . . . Had she altered her plans? Strange that she should be thinking of driving with me on the very day when she meant to fly with her lover! . . . Had she perhaps some blessed womanly idea of granting me the happiness of her presence for an hour, as a farewell memory? . . . Or was I only, once more, but an instrument of her purpose, a hinge in her scheme?

Roubilliac—we were rising from the table at that moment—shared in my surprise; and, markedly, in my doubt. As he snatched his napkin from under his chin, he turned sharply on the girl. She met his questioning glance with a steady eye.

"Is there any objection to a drive, doctor? Time is likely to hang heavy on Mr. de Quercy's hands. Why, he cannot even hope for the relaxation of a game of chess!"

Roubilliac fixed her for a moment in silence; then shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, good-bye," he said at last, "and a pleasant drive, Mr. de Quercy! It is not the least use, as I know by experience, for anybody to attempt interference with Mademoiselle's programme. So much wasted breath. You are not likely to be served to another homeric combat, although you may very well be let in for a more perilous kind of scrape."

"You cannot really think," she cried, "that I, of all people, could be the one to bring your delicate patient into peril—oh, Roubilliac!"

He gave her and me a comical glance over his shoulder; quoted, under his breath, "He that loves the danger shall perish in it," and departed in sudden bustle.

The instant the door closed behind him, the laughter faded from her face. She remained for a while standing, her hands on the back of her chair, contemplating me; and I thought her air was that of one who has weighty matters to communicate. But, when she did speak, it was only to toss at me a few careless words:

"A little drive, as far as the woods, perhaps into the woods—what say you? All Englishmen are sportsmen, we have the Vicomte's word for it. I believe what you most like, over there in your island, is shooting game—a partridge, am I not right?—or a pheasant, a hare, or even a white-tailed rabbit? Any of these may come our way. We will take a gun, Mr. de Quercy. And the sooner we start, please, the better. Could you, do you think," she added, rather tartly, as I stood

dumb, dissatisfied at her tone, "could you, as an exceptional favour, bestir yourself?"

Thus hustled, I darted up to my room and donned my travelling coat; and, upon a sudden impulse, thrust my Mantons into a pocket. . . . One never knows, I thought, escorting a lady. . . . And upon my soul, I felt, Mademoiselle's mien did not match her speech.

She was already high-perched in a light-built chaise, hung between two immense wheels, and provided with a calash hood now folded back. An odd-looking vehicle, but it struck me admirably suited to rough country.

"Come up into the *coucou*," she called gaily. "I have the gun, and all that is necessary. Ah, my poor Brisco! Listen to him!" she went on, as a long thin howl reached us from inside the house. "He has to stay at home, to-day. It is not his business to hunt the partridge. Besides"—she gave me her bright smile —"one good dog is enough."

She took up the reins in her gauntletted hand; and the horse, a rough-coated "Tarbes," started at a raking trot, boring against the bit after a fashion that might have disconcerted a less strong wrist than Diana's.

"He is not pretty, our brave Michel," she said as if in answer to my criticism, "but he is the sort that will stay you his twelve leagues, and be ready to begin again next day. And, in spite of his coat which, as it is also his vocation to wait about for hours, is kept long, he would never turn you a hair."

She seated herself more squarely, divided the reins between both hands as we swung into the high-road and the fresh smell of the down lands stimulated the Tarbes' ardour. In this movement, she had shifted the weapon which lay at her feet; and as I bent down to place it more conveniently, I saw to my surprise that it was no shot-gun, but a carbine. Straightening myself, I turned to her:

"Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu," I said, very quietly, "is it usual in Rouergue to go out partridge-shooting with ball?"

"Mr. de Quercy," she answered in the same tone, "when one goes out in the neighbourhood of Langévol, it is wise to be prepared for bigger game."

"We are for Langévol, then?"

"Yes."

The question and the answer alike were toneless.

I have just said that I had beheld the revelatory character of the gun with surprise; and yet this is scarcely correct. The sensation was rather one of confirmation. Had I not already felt the gravity behind her smile, and the anxious purpose underneath her jesting? Into what reckless folly was she bringing us? "I will lay claim upon that devotion," she had said last night, in an unforgettable moment. . . . Yes, I would be her servant, but not blindfold.

"I ought to know," I said, but without a hint of emotion. "If I am to do it well, I must know what you expect of me. I believe," I added with a dry laugh, "you would detail his duties even to Brisco."

"Excellent dog of mine," she answered me, "you shall have my confidence. All—without reservation. I know you to be discreet, sir. But, as St. Paul says, there is a time to speak, and a time to keep silence. While Castel-Rozac still held us was the time to keep silence. Now, in the wide plain, on our way to our purpose, is the time for speech."

A side-track across the down cut the high-road; with a masterful turn, almost without a check Louvecelle wheeled into it.

"But," I exclaimed, "this is not the way to the Wolf-house—at least not the way I took."

"No, sir," she answered, flicking the horse with a caressing whip, "and that is not astonishing, since it is my desire to drive you to quite a different destination. Our goal is the other side of the Langévol cliff."

I reflected a moment.

"And our purpose there?" I asked.

"I do not think, Mr. de Quercy, that you will draw back when I tell you that your friend is in peril—what shape it may take I cannot say; but he is in danger,

in dire danger, of that I am certain. I feel it in all my being. And it may be your privilege, I say your privilege, sir, to help him once again."

"Louvecelle," I said, using for the first time the name that so long had haunted my thoughts, "you promised that my service should be for you!"

"Do you pretend to deny, sir——" she began. Then she thought better of her harshness, and laid a hand upon my knee: it was a comrade touch, no more, no less, than that of Loup-Cervier, as he had walked by the side of Maréchal. But there was all a woman's consciousness of power in the eye she fixed on me as she proceeded:

"How could I call you to nearer service? Think. How can I show a deeper trust in a friend—how can you ever draw closer to my heart? Ah, Mr. de Quercy, I tell you he is in danger, I feel he is in deadly danger—such love as mine has unerring instincts. The feeling has been growing upon me every hour. Ah, God, let us hasten!" She urged the willing horse to its swiftest trot. "Even now, my mind misgives me, we may be too late."

I was moved by her emotion; by her words, little as they really could mean for me. "How could you be closer to my heart?" Something of the urgency of our hurried dash through the desert land, too, passed with anxious stirrings into my blood. God knows I would not have drawn back in any case, where perils unknown threatened that gay, gallant, winning wretch Montbars! But curiosity devoured me. The menace of Fouché spelt disaster enough; what new trouble hung over his reckless head?

"You know," I said, "I would not hang behind where you led. Yet, you talk of trusting, and I know nothing."

"It is a short story, and we have yet a long way to go. Never fear you will have time to hear it. It seems," she said then, "that there is treasure, after all, treasure in gold, in the old caves of Langévol, and——"

I interrupted:

"Yes, I know."

"You know? Yet you assured Cousin Gontran, only the other day, that you felt convinced of the reverse—that you believed it was all a myth. Nay, never mind, it is not worth discussion now. The important thing is that Loup-Cervier—Enguerrand, not that it matters to me how I call him, Enguerrand is a noble name, but it is strange on my tongue—Enguerrand has actually seen gold in the caves."

"I know that too; I was there when he saw it."

She started in violent astonishment, and gave a look of such intense inquiry, that I blurted out:

"Did he not tell you?"

"No, not a word of that," she said quickly; and pressed me with eager question.

With her imperious gaze upon me, under the spell of her compelling personality, and in my inner self-surrender, I could not have kept anything from her, even had I so desired. But Loup-Cervier's silence did not bind me.

"I do not think," I said, "that the secrecy Montbars begged me to keep upon that point, for the time being, applies to you."

I hastened then to relate as clearly and succinctly as possible the true story of our experience with the Giscourt tribe under the keep of Langévol. She listened with knitted brows.

"Now I understand," she said slowly, and gave a sigh half of apprehension, half of anger. "Now I begin to see clearly the danger that I could only guess. No, he did not tell me. At least not all. From what he told me of this Langévol enterprise, I only knew that the Giscourts, these sinister wretches, were acquainted with the treasure, were living on it, and no doubt jealously watching it. But I did not know they already suspected him—oh, my God, what madness! Was I not right? Did I not feel he was bent on his own destruction? Ah, he treated me like a child—but he could not deceive the insight of my soul! Savages,

brigands, like the Langévol people, with their suspicions aroused—to risk himself in those horrible caves!"

"Surely," I cried, aghast, "he is not thinking of penetrating again to old Giscourt's mint?"

"No," she answered, "I think not. From what you tell me, that lies on the near side of the ruins. Where we are bound for is the back of the Langévol hill. I will tell you all I know. Loup-Cervier, Enguerrand, has discovered, or believes he has discovered, the actual spot of the Templar's hoard. He has been exploring the caves for weeks. That sort of wild-work comes easy, too easy, to him—appeals to his roving instincts. Ah, woe the day when he found that entrance at the back of the cliff! He says he is certain no one knows the place of this treasure but himself. What the Wolf-house people have found must be another—you did speak of another which you thought might really have existed. Would to God they had all been myths! But the hoard exists, it seems. And Enguerrand is determined—ah, foolish fellow that he is, as if I had not enough for two!—if he has only one day to do it in, to secure what he can before our flight."

"What!" I cried, while those two words, "our flight," echoed like a knell in my heart, "has he returned to the caves? Why the place will be watched more jealously than ever now!—Madness!"

"Yes," she answered, almost in a murmur. "For the second time he is putting our happiness, the chance of our life together, his own existence, to the cast of hazard. Nothing that I could say to him, yesterday——"

She broke off, drew the reins tighter and flicked at the horse. I fell in a muse. I began to understand a little more of Montbars' doings and purposes at Langévol—his desire to strike some kind of intimacy with the tribe of the Louveterie, no doubt as a guidance to his movements; his swift apprehending of the whole situation when accident had brought him straight into the heart of the Giscourts' mystery—coiners' den; his evident knowledge of the far-stretching subterranean

recesses, when, compass in hand, he was orienting himself in the inner cave.

Adrienne's voice broke upon my thoughts.

"We had arranged between us," she resumed, now in quieter tones, "that I should come, with the *coucou*, and wait for him at a certain spot at the foot of the cliff—the place where we are now going—at dusk, and give him a hand in the carrying off of as much as possible of the treasure. Under the seat, there, are a couple of strong bags——"

"At dusk," I said.

"Yes, I know, it is early yet. It is some hours before the time. But have I not said it to you? I am pressed, driven, in anguish. God grant I may not even now be too late!"

We had reached the very top of the plateau. On our right the land swept away falling gently towards the blue North; long bleak stretches of downs with not a living sign in sight save, in a far hollow, a moving, struggling grey patch, a careering black dot and a single dark upright figure—a flock of sheep and their guardians. On the left the wooded heights of Langévol rose, a jagged outline, in every shade of tawny-grey and fawn. Under a sky of massed clouds the topmost battlements of the keep of the cliff-castle showed, livid white, a signal of menace, I thought. The blue and gold weather that had so gloriously painted my weeks at Castel-Rozac had given place in a night to the moist sway of the south-west winds. The vaults of heaven seemed to press down upon us with a sombre brooding. The gusts which beat across our course were at once vast, soft and chilly. The whole aspect of the country, of which we had here so wide a view, was on such a day melancholy in the extreme.

Now and again we could see a distant rain-storm fly; darkening the land as it went; and, in its wake, through a rift in the clouds, an awful finger of sunshine that for a brief spell would touch into unnatural colour and disquieting fires a brown copse, a white hamlet with its thin church spire far away, or a purple hill.

A trail of rooks came, calling, spreading and circling from the shelter of the Langévol woods; crossed our path, and settled with myriad flap of wings upon the barren ground, eyeing us with suspicion as we swiftly rolled past.

I find it difficult to describe the odd sinister significance that every natural sight took to itself that afternoon—the last I was to pass in Louvecelle's company. I believe nearly every one must have known such a haunted hour in his life, when the world about him seems to be in possession of a dire secret of Fate, waiting to unfold its terror.

The sense of evil omen which had so evident a hold of my companion's brave heart began to take grip of me also. The whole of my strange love-story was marked, in its barrenness, with a cruel irony. I had begged of Fortune, with a passionate impetuosity like a spoilt child, for this single boon: that I might have one day with her, alone, out in the wilds—one day, just she and I, with the breeze about us, freedom, movement, and solitude, under the marching skies. . . . And here it was given to me, here I sat, closer to her than ever before. . . . The great waste held us, just us two. And yet never had I been so far separated from her; never had I felt so isolated, so cast back upon myself! Never had my soul known such a cowering dread. It would have been a dark hour, with this gnawing anxiety at our heart, even if we had shared it in warmth of comradeship—even if the unbelievable had happened, and it had been an hour of love. But, as it comes back to me now, it is a memory as of some tombstone in the long stretch of my life-road.

There was a faint comfort, almost as of protection, when we wheeled at last, along an even rougher track, into the woods from the bleak dreary vastness of the downs.

The squall had passed over here. Rain-pools glinted coldly amid the dead leaves. It was bad going, and the valiant speed of the Tarbes had perforce to

slacken. His great hoofs struck the softer ground with muffled thuds and, now and again, a splashing or a scooping.

Louvecelle drove unerringly until we reached an opening glade. There she drew rein. In its November dreariness, the place was filled with melancholy. But, as I looked about me, I could well picture what an entrancing aspect it would present under blue and white skies and the glance of sunshine. Ancient oaks drew back from a gently hollowed dell; dying brake and close underwoods shut it away from the forest company. A small stream that ran chattering through a rocky channel made a miniature cascade, and disappeared between moss-covered boulders. With no surer guide than that of my jealous intuition I thought to myself: "Here is their trysting-place!" And I pictured Louvecelle, swiftly tearing upon Blanchette across the downs, with Brisco leaping by her side, towards the happy secrecy of the woodland. . . .

Turning upon me eyes circled with shadow, she instantly justified my stabbing thought by saying:

"Further than this I have never been. How changed everything looks!"

The gay audacity of their love, and the autumn glory in which it had been set, had matched each other well: defiant, aflame with colour, yet pure and fresh as the crisp, tingling airs. . . . It all seemed, now, like to be swept away together. In the world, dark skies, rising rough winds, drifting leaves—inevitable winter drawing nigh: in the soul, apprehension many-faced, uncertainties, sad whisper of coming disaster. . . .

Adrienne drove the *coucou*—since that is the only name by which I knew the strange vehicle—off the sodden track across the dip of the glade, reckless of the manner in which we swayed and jolted.

"He told me to skirt the brook. I do not know how far we really can drive, but the nearer the better. Hold on!"

She chirruped to the willing horse. We crashed over brambles and low brushwood. But presently the

dell widened out again; and, at the end, a jutting crag seemed to leap out of the woodland vista—a sheer wall, barring the way. It was from under the bank of fallen boulders, some still chalk-white, others moss-green, that the small stream, our guide, was issuing.

"This is the place," said Louvecelle, as if to herself.

She pulled up, tossed the reins to me, and swung down. Then she came round to my side, and looking up:

"Mr. de Quercy," she said, "the plan was that here I should come, not later than four o'clock. It is now not much after two. I myself, have no mind to wait. I cannot wait. Do you understand, sir"—her voice took colour—"do you realize that my betrothed, your friend, is there—there in the deeps of the earth? I cannot wait. I will, I must find my way in. Where he has passed, I can pass. If he wants help—and he may want help in a thousand ways—I can give it, as good as any man, thank God! If he merely wants some one to carry off his treasure . . . there can be no harm in being too soon. The gun, if you please—thanks. And if you look under the seat you will find the sacks I spoke of. Quick—give me them both."

I obeyed her injunctions in silence. Her whole being had changed again—manner, look, tone, all breathed courage and decision. When she spoke of herself as being as good as a man, it was with this much truth, at the least, that with her, spirit and strength rose at the prospect of action and danger.

She cast off her cloak and flung it into the cart. I saw that she was already provided with a haversack. She now slung the carbine on her shoulder: and, loosening her belt, thrust the sacks through them, one on each side.

"There," she said, with a brave show of light-heartedness, like the young soldier starting for battle, "there, I have panniers, after the fashion of your friend Madame la Marquise yesterday! How you stare, sir. It may not be becoming to my figure, but it leaves the hands free."

CHAPTER XVI

THE CAVES OF LANGÉVOL

"AND where is my part in this?" I asked angrily.

I had to call the words after her; for, turning away with a swift movement, she was already striding towards the cliff wall. She looked back at me over her shoulder, without stopping.

"There are all kinds of unknown dangers within there, Mr. de Quercy."

I sprang down.

"Yes, Mademoiselle. Therefore——"

"Therefore, if you were really wise," she stopped, turned and faced me, "you would wait quietly here, till we come out—if we come out."

"Is it not time," I cried, as I came up to her, "that you should stop jeering!"

Without noticing my reproach, she struck her forehead, with an exclamation:

"Stay, Mr. de Quercy! Fool that I am! The horse must be turned round and fastened. Fasten him there, to that bough of the oak! And the lantern—good God! —I was actually forgetting the lantern! Under the seat, sir. Bring it in. You have your pistols, I trust? Yes. Then come."

She took the lead again, with an energy that left me no time to expostulate or even to dwell upon my injured feelings. As I climbed the talus behind her there came to me a comprehension of Loup-Cervier's power over her: his unhesitating audacities had suited her impatient spirit.

We pushed our way round the corner of a buttress-

like jutting of the crags—no easy matter on the crumbling insecure slope, overgrown with brambles and creeping plants. To one side, the wood fell away in straggling degenerate growth, stunted here by the north exposure; to the other, the strange sudden outcrop of the cliff blocked the sky, almost the very air, it seemed. The gloom of the spot fell upon the soul like the shadow of the hawk on the bird.

Adrienne continued ahead, now slowly, now with greater speed, but with unvarying resoluteness. Presently she halted; beckoned to me, and pointed. Just in front of us, clambering feet had left marks of their passage—here a curtain of moss torn from the chalk, there the raw, empty socket of a recently dislodged stone. These unmistakable tracks still led upwards: to what goal it was impossible to guess.

"We must climb," she said with decision; and, suiting action to the word, swung herself up, with an ease and strength I could not but marvel at.

There came the moment, however, when the way grew so steep that my help could no longer be despised. She let me precede her, handed me the carbine, and allowed herself to be dragged up.

We had reached a fairly flat space; and there, a few feet before us, the cliff rose sheer, covered, in patches, by long brambles, mantle-like.

"I have lost the footmarks!" she said, frowning, and stared up and down the great rocky barrier.

"I hardly think," said I, "that even M. Montbars could escalade a perpendicular wall. If there is an entrance it must be hereabouts."

As I spoke, I thrust the butt of the carbine against the bramble screen in front. To my excitement I found no resistance.

"Here it is," I cried, eagerly pushing the thorny shoots right and left.

"Thank you—you are right," she said with a laugh, kneeling down to peer. "Yes, one can crawl in. Nay, I will go first, Mr. de Quercy—give me the lantern."

She put me on one side—almost before I could hold

back the brambles for her passage, she disappeared. I heard a thud, and the sound of rolling stones ; but even as terror laid hold of me, her voice rose up, clear—a music to my ear.

"All goes well. Jump down boldly."

I hardly waited for the words: I plunged, and the spiny curtain dropped behind me.

The jump had not been great, but the sudden and complete darkness made me feel as if I was leaping into illimitable space—and then it was as if the ground had risen up to meet me. Even as I staggered back to balance, a shower of sparks, orange and crimson against the gloom, flashed before my eyes.

"Stay where you are, till we have a light," said Louvecelle. Her voice sounded strange, beaten back on every side. The sharp strokes of flint on steel echoed and re-echoed. It stopped, and there followed the glow of tinder—just lighting her mouth and chin, as she blew upon it. Then rose a tiny lambent flame, wonderfully blue: she had lit the sulphur match. A few moments later an amber light rose and steadied itself—the candle! She raised the lantern and I saw her face emerge, beautiful, out of the darkness. Her face, with lips compressed and fine brows knitted, with nostrils dilated, and intent eyes; the face, I thought, of a young St. Michael.

She turned and swung the ray full to my side; nodded approval to see me ready, took the gun and handed me the lantern in its stead.

"All goes well," she repeated. "Keep the light low down and watch the footway. We must go warily. He told me, when he refused to let me come with him, that there are pitfalls—everywhere." She laid a hand upon my arm. "Forward," she said; "for the moment the way lies clear, we can go abreast."

I had flung the light upwards, sideways, down. It was, as she said, safe—a gallery, too regular not to have been the work of man, fairly high and wide, leading from the immediate whiteness which encompassed us like an aura to indefinite blackness ahead. But, since the

far-off days when human hands had hewn through the compact chalk, nature had reasserted itself: the roof and walls were hung with groups of stalactites like the tapering or grape-like pendants, the crockets and finials of some florid Gothic chapel. Only never did chapel sparkle with such miraculous sugar-whiteness. On every inverted spike hung the drops of the slow trickle that was imperceptibly, but everlastingly, lengthening it. And all about us the stealthy drip punctuated the silence with maddening, inexorable iteration. Ever and anon the icy drop would light on us, now on the nape of the neck, now on cheek or hand. As we went the white aura shifted and the black gaping mouth receded ever to the same mysterious distance.

We might have gone a couple of hundred yards, in a dumbness that seemed to become ever more sealed between us, when the dancing ring of light suddenly revealed ahead two gulfs of darkness instead of one.

Adrienne again laid her hand upon my arm.

"The way divides," she whispered. Somehow, a whisper seemed the only natural tone in this vast silence. "I don't know which to take."

"Let us stop and listen," I whispered back. "We may have some indication——"

The pulses were throbbing in my temples: I have no doubt the air was charged with noxious heaviness. At first I heard nothing but my own blood hammering. Then a hundred furtive sounds imposed themselves, laced by the trickling, now louder, now fainter, of some tiny rivulet. It seemed as though the whole place was full of unseen presences . . . as if eyes must be watching us yonder in those twin gulfs of shade. . . . And, through it all, the slow drip—drip from stalactite needles! The lantern, swaying in my hand, flung capricious circles of light, advancing, receding, on the wet gleaming walls and the oozy floor. There was something sinister in the unnatural whiteness about us, so swiftly swallowed up in the impenetrable gloom ahead.

Adrienne's face, as she turned it upon me doubtfully, looked blanched. Cold breaths passed over us from the

diverging channels. Each seemed to me, at the moment, as forbidding as the other. Yet choice had to be made.

I think it is sufficiently clear that indecision was not a weakness of Louvecelle. Abruptly, she passed the carbine from her right hand to her left, made a large sign of the Cross.

"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost," I heard her murmur. Then: "To the left, Mr. de Quercy, under God's protection," she ordered, and herself marched in front.

For a few paces I followed, dominated, as usual, by her will. But, all at once, the Ancient's warning at the Wolf-house: "Keep in the daylight, if you ever wish to see it again," and Louvecelle's own words of a moment ago, "There are pitfalls everywhere," rushed back to my mind. Even though she walked within the radius of the lantern's light, the vanguard was in a place of danger: I could not let her keep it a moment longer. On the impulse, I brushed past her. And well for her—for us all—that I did so! The floor of the gallery, which had become very uneven, was beginning to slope markedly down. My movement had been sudden and violent; it had thrust her roughly on one side, and set a loose stone rolling from under our feet.

"Mr. de Quercy!" she cried indignantly.

But, for once, I was swifter of intuition than she.

"Hush!" I said, and clutched her to my side. "Listen!"

The stone was hopping and rolling with increasing impetus. I held my breath. There came a little pause, and then a hollow sound—the unmistakable sound of a plunge into cavernous waters.

For a moment we clung together. At last Adrienne murmured in an awestruck voice:

"It is an abyss!"

"Wait here," I said, and crept cautiously forward, holding the lantern at arm's length in front of me. A chasm opened a few yards ahead. The ground fell away too abruptly for me to dare any further. But

there was a feeling of icy cold blowing up as from illimitable depths; a sense of great spaces above filled with a darkness impenetrable.

I set down the lantern, picked up another piece of rock and flung it as far as I could. It never reached an opposite edge, but again, after a terrifying interval, came the slap, the gulp, and the splash, and the long deep-mouthed reverberation, eddying up and up, to fall echoing down again.

I remembered and understood with a shudder. The underground waters of Langévol, celebrated in legend and history, these secret unfathomed mysterious lakes had well-nigh engulfed us! No one quite knew how far these backwaters of the Tarn worked underground, into what recesses they curved, to what awful depths they burrowed.

"Come back, Mr. de Quercy!" cried Adrienne.

She had uplifted her voice impatiently—and the echoes caught it: "Come back! . . ."

I returned to her; and we gazed at each other within our white aura. Comment was needless: our way lay not in that direction. She, too, gave a shudder.

"What a horrible place!" she murmured.

Without another word we began to retrace our steps. She quickened the pace. I could feel in her a recurrence of the urging anxiety she had betrayed during the drive: her lover was somewhere in that horrible place, in the maze of dire peril! I confess that the menace of those engulfing sounds followed me unpleasantly; and I had to fight against a sensation that the ground was everywhere ready to yawn under our feet. She would not pause when we reached once more the junction of the galleries.

"There can be no other way," she exclaimed impetuously, and hastened forward.

The passage here was slightly ascending, and altogether better going. We progressed without difficulty or incident, for many hundred yards. I surmised that we must be drawing pretty close to the castle end of the hill We walked quickly, but in thoughtful silence.

At length, after a sharp bend, the gallery widened and seemed, as far as I could make out in the darkness, to fork into several branches. Instead of pressing on to investigate, Loucevelle suddenly stopped as if struck, and arrested me with a quick gesture.

"What was that?"

I hearkened, but could hear nothing, save that fine web of intermingled small sounds to which I was already becoming accustomed—the faint sighing and rustling of oozing water, the occasional drip; the ghostly inner life of the cavern.

"There! Again!" Her voice was tense. Surely you hear!"

I came close. Then—it was the weirdest impression; it was like putting one's ear to the mouth of some invisible, intangible speaking-tube — I heard a cough, followed by a long-drawn groan and a subdued but high-pitched cachinnation.

On the instant memory was lashed back, so to speak, to the ledge overhanging the ravine, at the foot of the ruins. I saw, as if painted on my mind, the tormented face, the beaded parchment forehead of the Ancient. I heard him lament his knees . . . his "sacred gouty knobs! . . ."

Adrienne caught hold of my sleeve: she bent her head so close that her breath fanned my cheek.

"What is it? It seems to be actually in my ears!" Then she gave a little nervous laugh. "Why, it is nothing but a goat!"

"Hush!" I answered; and scarcely conscious of what I did, placed my hand on her mouth. Too well did I know that evil bleating!

Another cautious step forward brought me more clearly into the focus sound. At the same time, Adrienne, withdrawing from my audacious touch, exclaimed, amazed:

"How strange!—now I hear nothing. What is——"

With a gesture I enjoined silence, for I was hearing a good deal. The almost terrifying sense of the uncanny fell from me as the explanation of the mystery

dawned upon my mind. A "whispering gallery!" Antiquarian student as I was, I could not be ignorant of the existence of this strange echoing trick of nature, or accident in architectural designs—which no human ingenuity seems ever to have been able to reproduce deliberately. I knew of the classic "Ear of Dionysius" in the cave-prisons of Syracuse; I had heard of the whispering gallery at St. Paul's, of another in the Roman catacombs. . . . Here, at this bend of the mediæval subterranean corridor, we had stumbled upon the discovery of yet another—an amazing one! The fantastic secrets hidden under the Langévol cliffs had yielded a fresh surprise.

Somewhere—it might be close, or it might be far, for the eerie nature of those freaks of acoustics is that the merest whisper of sound from a distant spot is conveyed, not audible in the interval, to another point under the same roof, with magnified, ghastly distinctness—somewhere in the caves, old Giscourt was shuffling his way, coughing, muttering, groaning to himself under the weight of his infirmities, yet chuckling with evil triumph like some monster of old legends crawling forth to seize an adventurous prey. . . .

Without understanding the reason as I did, Adrienne realized that, to get within the mysterious zone of hearing, she must draw near to me again. I took her by the arm and she pressed closer. We listened intently (I have the dear impression of it still with me) like two lost children, innocently holding to each other.

Every one knows the effect made on the nerves, in the deep silence of night, by the passing of a rat behind the wainscot at the back of one's bed; or even by the scratching climb of a mouse up a curtain: it almost seems as if the minute paws were treading on the drum of one's ear. In some such way the shuffling, uneven footsteps reached us—there was a monstrous uncanniness about the whole thing. To judge by the ear only, the old scoundrel must be so close that by stretching a hand one ought to have been able to touch him. And

yet it was impossible to say how far he might not be. For the moment, all one could do was to stand helpless, and hearken.

"Eh, eh, eh, eh! our fine young man—the great wolf-hunter! Eh, eh! the clever youth, who came to show us the way of things!—eh, eh, eh!"

The dragging steps, the beat of the stick, the crunch of a loosened pebble, here and there the very brushing of a garment against the rock—it all seemed to be positively on the top of us. Now the footsteps ceased, and there was a moment filled only with wheezy breathing. The patriarch had certainly halted. Then came another chuckle, and the awful senile voice was uplifted again from a stationary point into the sonority of a wider space:

"Eh—lá, Monsieur Montbars! You down there! Come out and have a little talk! Eh—eh—to think of the hero who forced old Bertrand being caught this way in a hole!"

"Oh, my God!" panted Adrienne in my ear. "Which way is it? It seems to come from every side! Let us go on!"

"If we move away from here, we may lose our chance altogether. Let us hear more."

The old one of Langévol was seized with a violent cough; the shrillness of his triumph was too much for his ancient throat. And now, louder than his spasm, we heard footfalls, scrambling, as of some one climbing a difficult slope; presently another noise—an odd noise, part thud, part rattle. And then a strong, rather harsh, yet not unmusical voice—the unmistakable voice of Montbars rang out.

I swear to you, the effect of it was so startling that my heart almost stopped. To hear those singularly attractive, virile tones, that unusual drawling intonation, that exotic French, the twang of mockery that was so peculiarly his own . . . to know him there, unseen, unattainable, God knew how far away, in such peril! . . . The very same Montbars as ever, unmoved, defiant, gay . . . perhaps on the brink of some horrible death!

"Ah, and is it you in truth, revered ancestor of all the Giscourts? Who would have thought of meeting you again, so far from your armchair! But I rejoice to see you unimpaired by your experiences of the other day."

"Eh, young man, and what may you have in that sack?"

"This, my good sir? Treasure trove!"

"Treasure! What are you doing here in my caves? Sacred thunder, my caves! My——"

The old man had suddenly passed from unholy glee to a squealing ferocity, the ferocity of the physically weak. Montbars—how well one could recognize him there!—instantly varied his own mood to meet it. From airy impertinence he passed, still mocking, to defiance and menace.

"Do not over-excite yourself. Your caves! My word, you have nerve, to tell me of your caves! It would be interesting to look over old man Giscourt's title-deeds to No-man's-land! It would indeed. Calm yourself, worthy Methusaleh. Now, now, save your breath! Think of your septuagenarian throat! You'll have another fit of the cough. No-man's-land, I repeat. Ownerless ruins, or at best King's way, above and below. Yes, mine ancient friend, treasure trove! And with treasure trove, as you know, finding is keeping. Keeping. Don't jibber. Keepings, I say, and no halvings."

Through the resonance of Montbars' voice could be heard the other's uncouth wheezes and splutters.

"Halvings? Hear the brigand! Devil's thunder, no! We'll have no halvings—you sneak, you sneaking thief!"

"Soft, soft, grandpapa! What, shall the venerable pot call the young kettle black? Thief and brigand do you say, Sir False Coiner? I grant you should be a judge—but I have no time to-day for talk, however much I should enjoy an interchange of civilities at another moment. Let us admit, to conclude the argument, that we are both gallows-birds, and strike a bargain. If you'll keep your beak shut about me, I'll

not as much as breathe a caw about your coining. And now, my patriarch, out of the way? You don't quite know the man you have in hand."

Here it seemed that the ancestor of Langévol yielded himself altogether to his delirium of rage:

"Coiner! False coiner, listen to the thief! False? as good gold as ever was minted! The sneaking *mirliflore!* False coin, you brigand, you? Better gold —good English guineas—than ever was hammered at the Banque. My own gold, eh, eh! In my own land, you creeping polecat, you weasel, you sneaking magsman!"

At the very height of vituperation, he broke into elaborate jeering; which, however, rose rapidly again to shrieks of hatred and triumph:

"Eh, eh, eh! the clever young man! Blessings on him for a brave, clever lad! He's found another *cache* for us. Eh, eh, the Templars' treasure! He's found it all by himself—for us, the kind boy! Clever lad! But, eh, eh, eh! It was a little mistake—a little mistake, to give away the show with that zany of an Angliche. Oh, the frank hunter sneaking into our ruins! The innocent tourist! 'Grandpa,' whistles me this pilfering magpie? Eh, eh, eh! But grandpa is wide awake. Grandpa sees. You don't put the hood on grandpa this way! Eh, eh, queer visitors at the Wolf-house? So grandpa thinks he'll take a look round the caves. And now he has caught you, you magpie! So—you'll keep your mouth closed, you think, you marauder? Eh, eh, no doubt you will. We'll see to that! Perhaps, oh yes! Oh yes, we'll see to that! Snug chambers at Langévol for our visitors—always handy. Can't spare our visitors, they have to stop with us, eh, eh, eh! Safe lodgings always handy! Oh, M. Montbars is a clever one! Montbars all the way from Paris! But not cleverer than Moncabrier, that came all the way from Toulouse, with his *roasters*, came to warm our feet, as he thought, to good tune. Eh, eh, we cooled them—cooled them! Not cleverer than Pujol and his band, that smelt the shiners all the way

from Bordeaux. Where are they? Snug in the cool—snug down there! The pack of them. Thirteen. D'ye hear? Six of Pujol's, seven of Moncabrier's! Thirteen smart fellows, not one mean, sneaking marauder, like clever M. Montbars! Thirteen of them in cool pickle, ever since—in the snug chamber—down there, look! That is not counting little Marius Barras, from Millac—like you, eh, eh!—who had lost his way for three days before we heard his howls. And he went, to talk of what he had seen here—down there, in the cool. Down there with Pujol and the others. As you will, you and your Angliche too. Keep a close mouth, will you? Eh—eh—eh! Ah, thunder, yes!"

There was a rattling, clinking, dragging noise; and above it, Montbars' voice, fierce:

"For the last time, old one, out of my way! Out of my way if you value your bones!"

An eldritch scream rang in our ears; and, almost immediately, a shrill whistle, piercing to the very brain. Adrienne broke from my grasp and sprang forward; and I leaped after her. At once, we came weirdly into silence. We stopped short, baffled: which way?

But, by the mercy of God, as if to point out the branching gallery that led to our goal—the whistle was repeated; twice, and this time it reached us, if faintly, from a long distance ahead, at least through a recognizable channel: it was the left passage.

Without a word, under the pulse of the same thought, we took to running; and presently passed into a zone of new sounds, coming straight into our faces from afar. Normal sounds, these: not the horribly close, unplaceable echoes of the whispering gallery! Yet sounds of evil portent enough; urgent to draw us recklessly on. Tramp of rushing feet, hails and shouts; the crack of a shot which set the vaults roaring, followed by a rattle of falling stones. The gallery opened out; the gloom, receding before us, seemed suddenly to stop and to become painted as with an archway of uncertain light, through which gleams and shadows leaped and danced. And then our own lantern light broke upon

what appeared like a jagged parapet, breast high; over which, through a broad opening—but recently made, to judge by the piles of fresh broken stone at its foot—we could look, as from a minstrel balcony, upon a wide cavern some few feet lower down.

It was one of the great rock-chambers of Langévol.

I could as soon describe the successive phases of my worst nightmare as relate, in proper balanced sequence, what took place during the next few minutes in that cavern, three hundred feet beneath the roots of the nearest tree! Many strange scenes must these secret spaces have witnessed, through the centuries; but none, I will wager, stranger than the fevered struggle in which Louvecelle and I—and another combatant, of whom anon—found ourselves thrown from one second to another, in the defence of the hard-pressed Loup-Cervier.

The memory of these moments is more that of impression than of event. I can ascribe no exact length of time to the experience. . . . I remember the feel of the grit and rough edge of the rock under my wrist as I leaned over . . . the cold touch of Louvecelle's carbine barrel as she thrust it across the edge . . . the sulphurous reek of powder that still hung in the air mixing with the indescribable smell of dank stone. . . .

I close my eyes, now, to the book-lined peaceful English room in which I sit weaving the web of my old-time tale . . . and, instantly spreads itself, tinted in dream-grey, the strange, fleeting spectacle that met them all these lustres ago. . . . The great engulfing space, filled with smoke gloom, mottled here and there with dim lights: a shifting tangle of shadows. . . . Those yellow blotches upon the dull white ground are lanterns. Those deeper mouths of darkness are galleries converging into the cave. As I peer, I begin to discriminate one on the left, plain revealed by a swinging glow—another lantern, high held: I can see the fingers clenched upon it; and, underneath, a boyish face, angry, intent, frightened, with starting eyeballs that appear and

disappear as the light swings, and, instinctively, my gaze turns in the direction of those staring eyes. There a confused mass sways and struggles, with sounds of mortal strife. One figure, lithe, agile as a wild cat, eluding every grasp, every blow—the very genius of fight—stooping here to dart up there and deal some ferocious stroke—a blue glint: the deadly navaja! . . .

I have dropped the lantern, my pistols are in my hand . . . but I am as in a trance of doubt. . . . Louvecelle pushes me aside. I feel her brace herself; hear the sharp treble click of her carbine as she raises the lock—the point of her elbow strikes my temple. Then, if I may use so bold an hyperbole, I hear the deadly silence of her aim. The flare and the crack break forth together, and the thunderous clamour of cavern echoes beats about us. . . . One of the shadows reels, turns on itself and sinks. The roll of smoke breaks into wreaths, and through them I see that the dark struggling tangle has parted. Stillness has, for an instant, fallen on the place and I feel rather than see the upward stare of every pair of eyes. But only for a second—Loup-Cervier has made another bound, and yet another shadow, with a yell, falls under the blue stab. The goat's bleat is uplifted:

"Don't shoot, boys! *Aie, aie!*"

It is a dreadful cry, between terror and rage, and dreadful too is the laugh that greets it, the laugh of a man mocking death. And now the scene resolves itself into greater distinctness. I see the meaning of both the shriek and the laughter. Montbars stands, gripping the old man from behind, wheels him hither and thither as a human shield. . . . It is against the menace of the Wolf-Master and one of his sons, who bend this way and that, one with drawn hunting knife, the other with pointed gun. . . . I recognize them, as they pass close to one of the cast-down lanterns—the son is Thibaut, the merry wine-drawer.

"Don't shoot!" squeals the Ancient. "Behind! get behind! Catch him! Strangle! Down the hole—throw him down!"

Montbars retreats, to get his back to the wall, still jerking the old man, as you may see a dog jerk a rat. . . . But, as if one of those dark-mouthed passages had belched him forth, a figure leaps with a single spring and hangs on his shoulders, like a hound on a stag. Loup-Cervier reels, flings away his human shield. With an effort of which only one of his marvellous alertness could have been capable, he recovers his balance, and by a twist of body, swift as lightning, grips his new assailant. . . . The old man has pivoted on himself and fallen, with a ghastly crack of his yellow skull on the rock. And, instantly, I know he is dead. Dead this time! And it is a mere heap of rags that lies outstretched upon the white. Those two, the Louvetier and his son, with a yell of execration, rush again. Thibaut thrusts himself before his father, clubbing his gun. . . .

I believe that I rose to the danger before Louvecelle; that my wits, if slower to wake, had kept steadier than hers at this supreme moment of menace. I took the risk—for another second would have found Loup-Cervier's head shattered. I stretched out my arm and fired. . . . And, once again, the Manton lifted Montbars from the very edge of death! No doubt if I had had time for it, deliberate aim would not have served me as surely as the fierce instinct which threw my pointing finger straight at the murderer. Before the report had died down Thibaut, still clutching the gun, had collapsed across the body of the grandfather.

And here it was that the final touch of dream-like extravagance was given to these experiences. A monstrous hairy creature came bounding from behind towards us; a panting, slavering beast, with gaping jaws and dripping tongue; like nothing, to my fancy, but the slaughtered Bertrand! I had barely time to wheel round and place myself before Adrienne and aim the pistol still balanced in my hand, before the thing was upon us. But she struck up the weapon.

"Brisco!"

Then, with a wide gesture:

"Brisco—good dog!—At them. Good Brisco!"

In a single flying leap the noble beast was through the opening; and Adrienne, leaning over the wall, gave another loud cry; her voice was so strained I should never have known it.

"At him! At him! Good Brisco! Down him, hold him, good Brisco!—Courage, Loup-Cervier!"

I reached her side again just in time to see the climax of the terrible drama.

Brisco had the Wolf-Master by the throat. The suddenness of the onslaught had knocked the knife out of the Giscourt's hand. Man and dog wrestled in deadly strife, with growlings, as bestial on one side as on the other. Montbars had already freed himself of his assailant, and even as I looked threw him, half stunned, against the wall, with a fierce ease that matched his triumphant burst of laughter. The boy with the uplifted lantern, who had had no stomach for the fight, had turned and flown back down his gallery. The end was at hand.

Pressed, in his agony of strangulation, irresistibly backwards by the wolf-hound, the Louvetier suddenly gave a deep groan, and disappeared from sight with his conqueror. It was as if the earth had opened out and swallowed them both. Then, once again, rose that sound of gaunt horror that had warned us away from the other gallery—intensified, charged with a new awful significance: the sound of engulfing waters.

A gash in the ground, yawning blacker than the capricious lantern shadows, told its tale. With a kind of spectral vision, I now took in the gruesome meaning of those hints and threats of the old sinner, that had sounded like the ravings of inane fury—the snug chamber awaiting visitors to the caves . . . the cool place, the safe lodging . . . the promised company of Moncabrier, of Pujol . . . of little Marius who had been too inquisitive!

The long-sustained circling echoes, the waning

trail of the Louvetier's groan as he fell, were witness to the appalling depth of the shaft that led to the underground backwaters. . . . I could see the icy flood closing over him; the skeleton company that waited in that unplumbed pit . . . And, with a twist of the heart, I thought of the dog—the noble dog!

Weakly, I covered my eye with my hand; but a shout from Montbars swiftly drew my gaze again to the arena.

Adrienne was no longer at my side. She had swung herself over the broken wall. He had leaped to meet her, and was holding his arms up for her.

Astonishing creature that he was! From multiplied menace of annihilation; from the shedding of blood, the dealing of death; from the spectacle of a hideous punishment, he rose laughing, untouched by any emotions save those of triumph, mirth, and love! I declare that his zest for life had been only sublimated by the horrors from which he emerged.

"Louvecelle—Louvecelle!" he cried, and laughed exultantly. "Ah, is not this like you!" He folded her in his arms, kissed her passionately on the lips. "By the lord, by the lord—what a glorious soul you are! What a glorious piece of work this is—and to have done it with you!"

"Loup-Cervier!—Brisco, my dear old Brisco. . . ." As soon as she could speak these were her first words. "Can nothing be done to save him?"

She made a movement as if to run towards the pit which I now could see so clearly, so dreadfully gaping, that I marvelled it had not been the first thing in the cave to draw my gaze.

"Not a step! It is as deep as hell. It was either him or me!"

At this she clung again to him, mutely.

"Now," he cried, rallying her, "we have not a moment to lose. That boy—I was a fool not to fling him in too—he has bolted"—indeed, of all the tribe, there were none left under the vault but the bodies stretched upon the ground—"he'll have more of them

down on us! The hue and cry, in less than no time! And my haul—such a haul, Louvecelle! Ah, if it had not been so heavy, I'd have won out of this before the old devil whistled up his whelps. Come, my Louvecelle—our wedding portion! But you must lend a hand. Your hand is almost as strong as your heart! And, by the way"—he looked back in my direction—"and you, up there—Quercy, isn't it? Come down! Hurry, man! Help us with the treasure. Rare stuff for an antiquary, I promise you!"

He stepped airily over the Ancient's corpse; took a few quick paces towards the pit, and stooped. And again I heard the rattling sound that had been brought to my ear in the whispering gallery: he was lifting the bulging sack. With a laughing "Heave, ho!" he hoisted it on his shoulder.

As I drew near, another gap in the ground became apparent. It was at the foot of the rock side; a fair-sized manhole bearing every appearance of recent opening even as our walled entrance into the cave. One glance revealed what was unmistakably a flight of descending steps. An *oubliette* of the dark ages, no doubt closed and obliterated through centuries; to be rediscovered by the Loup-Cervier's uncanny sagacity. . . . But I had no time to muse. Montbars was staggering under his load—perilously near the edge of the chasm. He had soon to drop his burden again.

With an impatient exclamation he called on us.

"Louvecelle—and you Quercy—what ails you both? There is precious little time to lose."

He broke off, stared at Adrienne, and clapped his hands with an air of delight:

"The sacks! You've got them at your waist! Splendid comrade that you are. You think of everything! Quercy, lazy fellow, hurry up, here! Capital, capital!" he cried excitedly. We'll divide up. One each!"

I made a movement toward him. But the ring of Adrienne's voice arrested me.

"No, Loup-Cervier, no! I will not have you hold

your life—our life—so cheap. You shall not gamble with death any more. I will not bear it!"

She darted forward; with a passionate effort of strength sent the load rolling into the abyss; the waters and the rocks cast up their gulping roar again.

There ensued a breathless pause. The action had been so unexpected, and so swift, that the deed was done before Montbars, for all his hair-trigger readiness, could interfere. He spat out one of his outlandish oaths with a kind of yell, and made towards the pit-mouth a leap which she in her turn arrested. They stood, breast to breast, looking into each other's eyes defiantly.

"Come," she commanded. "We are well rid of it! There was blood on the gold. Come out of this horrible place. Come, before death overtakes us too!"

Now, whether my imagination—which is very likely—played me a trick, or whether there were real sounds coming through the cavernous passages in front of us, I cried out:

"They are coming back upon us. For God's sake——"

The imminence of danger instantly restored Montbars' gallant humour. He resumed command of the situation. Nimbly running hither and thither he kicked or flung every lantern into the pit; save one which he retained. Then coming back to Adrienne, and clasping her by the waist, he made an imperious call on me as he drew her towards our gallery. Between us we helped her back through the opening; then clambered up after her.

"You, Quercy," he ordered, "crouch behind the parapet. Keep your eye, for a minute, on the mouth of that gallery, and your Mantons ready—and, at the first glimpse of a face, shoot—then follow! And you, leap with me, my Louvecelle. God, what sport!"

The two glorious creatures passed me by, linked to each other. I could not help looking after them a moment; they trod the length of the corridor as if in a fantastic dance, flying in their own circle of light. In the cave—I must have been mistaken—not a breath

stirred. There was nothing to do but to pick up my own lantern and hie me in their wake at my best speed.

The moment you turn your back upon an enemy, fear itself becomes the pursuer. I now felt as if the whole sinister cavern were chasing me, with its nameless horrors—bleeding dead men . . . the one I had myself shot between the shoulders . . . the two or three struck by the blue blade, the bundle of limp rags that had been the patriarch . . . the Wolf-Master, dripping with black water. I ran faster and faster; and fell; picked myself up, my lantern flame put out, and ran again, in the dark; passed, wildly, groping, once more through the focus of sound at the bend; a medley of shouts and wails, and the tramp of footsteps filled my ear for a second—they had come, right enough! Then dead silence again, while I tore on, in a new terror, feeling that if I lost sight for one instant of the small hopping circle of light now far ahead of me, the nightmare would swallow me up as inevitably as the pit had swallowed the Louvetier of Langévol—aye, and the last of the true-bred Irish wolfhounds!

CHAPTER XVII

THE WRAITH, AND THE HEIR

NEVER in my life have I been more grateful than for the draught of free air that blew down upon my face through the opening on the cliff-side. Loup-Cervier and Louvecelle held the brambles apart for me, one on each side, as I crawled out. Blessed air of the open—it was life to my oppressed lungs! So may Lazarus have felt when the stone was rolled away and he came forth.

Fresh air, charged with the smells of living earth—wide, free, moving air, instead of the stagnant breath of the vault! Relief to the ear from that drip-drip that had maddened the thought in pauses of watchfulness. Relief, too, from the throbbing of the pulses which, beginning like muffled hammer strokes, had ended in a kind of hissing boom!

The living wind was rushing up to us from the woods. Never was music more exquisite than its mighty, untrammelled call; never was refreshment to compare with its sweep against the cheek. And never was vision more comforting than that of this dusk-filled open world; of this far horizon where the sunset reflection gleamed yellow between swift-sailing grey clouds.

But there was more than mere physical delight to mark the moment. They had waited for me! They had not left me to shift for myself. . . . The thought of their desertion had been the worse of the nightmare imps that had hunted me all the way from the great cavern to the cliff mouth. Had I not seen these two,

close clasped, pass me without so much as a look or a backward glance, and flee ahead, intent only on each other and on the life awaiting them? . . . She had told me that Brisco would die for her, and I had boasted I would do not less. The hound had accomplished his final service—would I even have had a place beside his in her memory, had I also found my tomb in the caves of Langévol for her sake? . . . But kindly hands now grasped mine. Kindly words greeted my ears.

"Bravo, Quercy! Friends in need, twice over, you and your barkers! Up with you, friend! So!"

She, too, called me friend; kept my hand still clasped as she stood beside me a moment amid the brambles, and, in her words of thanks, there was a sound, I declare, as of held-back tears.

The while, he, with the eminent practicality of his character, busied himself in rolling down two or three mighty blocks of rock and wedging them tightly in the opening.

"It won't stop them long," he said, panting, ramming in a last boulder as a key-stone, "but it is quite worth while keeping them back a bit. And now for the cart, and sharp the word!"

We scrambled down, headlong; they were both at the foot of the talus before me. As I drew near, I saw him fling an arm about her again, and heard him say, laughing as if it were all the hugest joke in the world:

"I begin to think it was a God-sent inspiration to toss the sack away. Upon my life, I never could have left it! I am sure I could not. To judge by the weight, there could not have been less than six thousand *louis* worth of gold. No, I would never have let go of it! And we should all be paying for our—our vivacities with the Giscourts, inside there by this time——" He paused a second, with a complacent smile. "That old devil of a grand-dad! A stroke of genius, wasn't it, laying hold of him, just in the nick?"

He was laughing, delightedly, as we moved on together towards the chaise. But a certain inner shudder seized upon my soul; the world is never quite

the same for him who has deliberately taken human life.

He made me and Adrienne get into the *coucou;* and himself forthwith led the horse through the devious woodland path until we reached the margin of the open down. Then he jumped in, took the reins from her hand, and we set off at a pace which justified the confidence reposed in the Tarbes.

We were a pretty tight fit in that chaise. As Adrienne took the middle seat between us, she said, in her brief, decisive way:

"I am taking my cousin straight back to the castle. That will be the safest. It would be tempting Providence for him to return to his own lodgings. He can have supper at Rozac before we go away together to-night."

I did not answer, the words were so many stabs to me. She, apparently ascribing another cause to my silence, went on and—this time some kind of emotion vibrated in her voice:

"Cousin Gontran will know nothing. We need not fear to distress him, he is to keep his bed for some days more. But, even were it otherwise, whither should the son of Castel-Rozac seek refuge but in his father's house?"

Here Montbars broke in—his mind harking back to his first disappointment:

"To say the truth, Louvecelle, if I did not love you so terribly, I could find it in me to hate you! To fling away all the labour of these weeks—at the very hour of attainment! No, it was not like you. Scruple? Panic? Folly, anyhow. Great Gods, could we not have held our own against the new lot, if they really came——"

"They did come—I heard them," said I, speaking into space.

He looked sideways at me; shrugged his shoulders, and went on to the girl:

"I warn you, Louvecelle, I will be after that sackful, some day—it must lie where it fell, anyhow—if God lends me life."

"God has lent you life afresh this day, Loup-Cervier," she rebuked him gravely, "but not in order that you should gamble with it again. Do not forget that I have lost for you more than untold sacks of gold could be for me—my old Brisco. Dear faithful friend—he felt my danger, as I felt yours—escaped and tracked me into the cave, as I tracked you——"

The chaise swerved because the driver, flinging his arm round his betrothed's shoulders, was occupied in stopping her words with kisses instead of attending to the reins. We were off the track; the wheel titled against a bush. She gave an impatient cry of warning:

"Ah, my friend, if you spill us, we shall indeed be well advanced!" Then: "In God's name"—her voice trailed suddenly into a thin scream—"what is that?"

The dusk was gathering closely upon the land. It was difficult to see with any distinctness beyond a few yards. The downs spread, shadowy on every side, the track showing only a fainter grey against the darker, with here and there a gleam of rain-filled rut throwing back the primrose of the horizon. Something had leaped at us, out of this lost misty world. It sprang at the side of the chaise; then at the horse's head, then, falling back, circled widely about us, gave a single deep bark, and disappeared.

For the first time, in all the dangerous and passionate experiences through which we had passed together, I saw fear lay hold of Louvecelle.

"It is my dead Brisco," she murmured. "My dead Brisco. His wraith! It is a warning!"

I will not deny that I was impressed myself. In the gloom the beast looked strangely huge; his manner of springing silently upon us and disappearing had been weird in the extreme, and, to my ear, that single bark had had in truth a ghostly sound. Montbars, however, was not the man for fancies.

"Nonsense," he began in his practical way, "a stray sheep-dog, or——" but broke off; choked an ejaculation in his throat, and pulled up. "Queerer things have

happened," he said, as if to himself ; whistled and called out :

"Here, Brisco—Brisco!"

Out of the distance and the darkness came a muffled thudding sound; and presently the great wolf-hound, for in truth it was Brisco, reared himself against the footboard, and sniffed across me towards his mistress. He was glistening wet. A long slimy water-weed and some bramble twigs hung from his collar. He gave a whimpered greeting, and stretched his neck towards her. As soon as she could grasp the astonishing truth, her joy overcame her. I knew she was shedding tears.

"My Brisco—my old faithful *touton!*" she repeated sobbing, patting the huge head.

"No ghost!" laughed Montbars. I think he was a little jealous. "A very solid Brisco—none the worse for his swim in the underground Tarn. Clever, though, to have nosed his way out. But, come, we cannot be sentimental over a bath!"

As we bowled along once more, the dog went off again, careering. Two or three times he circled round us at his long lolloping stride, throwing up his head, and playing with a bark in his throat as if it were a kind of tit-bit. What an adventure!—to have overthrown in single combat the terrible Wolf-Master himself ; to have been hurled in actual death grips into unfathomed cave waters, and to have found a way out through Heaven only knew what subterranean labyrinth to the banks of the open river! Yet Brisco was, to all appearance, serenely unconscious of any very particular achievement. He soon settled down to his wolf-trot, his head level with the wheel—none the worse, as Montbars had said, for his plunge.

The rest of our drive was accomplished in silence. There was no sign of pursuit from the Wolf-house. Night had fallen very quickly under the laden sky ; but before the high wind the clouds rolled up and broke, and between their jagged edges a full moon, ruddy through the mist—no "dying lady, pale and lean," this, but a globe as of brooding fire showed, glimmering ever

and anon, to be lost again. . . . A good night for a flight, I knew ; but full, to me, of melancholy omen.

We did not drive into the Court of Honour, but drew rein at the archway leading in to the stables, where Adrienne summoned a lad, and handed the chaise over to him. She then led the way round the garden, to that small postern door by which I had first entered Castel-Rozac.

Without a word I went straight up to my room ; and, as the two turned away down the deserted passage leading to the library, I knew they did not want me. Indeed they could scarce remember me save by an effort of kindness ; and it was this feeling, more even than an Englishman's instinctive preoccupation for clean hands and decent ordering of dress, that made me slip away from them.

My own quarters gave me a certain home-like and familiar welcome. They were made cheerful by a leaping fire in which Louradour's unfailing solicitude was recognizable ; the curtains were snugly drawn upon the stormy night without. In spite of its own incomparable stateliness, the room seemed to smile at me, like that great gentleman, the master of the house, unbending indulgently to the stranger. I lit a pair of sconces, and made haste to fling off my soiled garments, laved the white mud stains from hands and face, and clothed myself in attire suitable to the surroundings.

I made haste, I said—yet, my toilet accomplished, and Charles de Quercy once again a young English gentleman of respectable mien, I hesitated, and finally decided against rejoining yet the two whom I had served so vitally through the strange happenings of these last days.

"They do not want me—of course they cannot want me," I said to myself again ; and dropped moodily into the armchair by the fire. I felt singularly tired, and I had, growing on me, that aching of the head to which I had become so easily liable since my accident. But above all I had a sorry heart, and gazed into the flames with an ever-deepening sense of abandonment.

The great escutcheon over the mantel was in shadow, but now and again a gold letter would twinkle at me out of the proud device. The candles on the dressing-table seemed to give no more illumination across the length of the room than a couple of stars in the night. The figures in the tapestry panels—hounds and stags, and huntsmen, and the impossible trees, moved mysteriously with the leaping of the firelight—it was the very setting for an hour of melancholy musings. But I was not long left to that sad luxury.

Hurried steps came along the passage; and Louradour broke in upon me, a prey to the most violent excitement that I had ever beheld even in him.

"God be praised!" was his first exclamation, and I own it touched me. "God be praised, you are here, safe and sound! Just heaven!"—he clasped his hands and flung his eyes upwards—"what is coming to Castel-Rozac?"

He took a few running steps to the chair upon which I had tossed my white-besmeared garments.

"I see. Your honour's state is no better than that of Mademoiselle and of——" He checked himself and came back to me at the same running pace; bent and whispered, with starting eyes and a glance behind him as if he feared to be overheard even in this secluded room; "and of that man—that gentleman, I mean—that Monsieur Montbars. Mademoiselle says—Mademoiselle tells me it is no other——" he mopped his forehead, "no other than the heir, the heir of Castel-Rozac, sir!"

He drew a long breath, and it was with an obvious accent of relief that he went on:

"Ah, your honour knows. I have betrayed nothing, then. Mademoiselle says it to me like that: 'Here is your young master, Louradour. Here is M. Enguerrand de Ruffeleu. My cousin. I tell it to you, but it is a secret. We must send him away to-night, for he is in danger. And you must help, my good Louradour—for your old master's sake!' Those were Mademoiselle's words. — Phew!" He straightened

himself, blew a doleful puff of bewilderment. "'For Monseigneur's sake!' she said. Positively, I don't know where I stand—I don't know where my head is!"

He lifted both his plump hands to his temples, and clutched the silvering black locks. Then he bent to me again:

"And my old master——" he went on, "will you believe it?—my old master has done nothing all day but rave against—whom do you think?—whom, but this very Monsieur Montbars! 'Louradour,' he bids me, yes a hundred times if once he said it to me, 'should that young man, Mr. de Quercy's friend, venture to present himself, refuse him the door. I will not have that personage across my threshold again.' Ah, sir! And then to see Mademoiselle, there, in the library, holding him by the hand, as I came in! Before I can as much as open my mouth. 'The heir,' says she! And Monseigneur, if I am not as mad as he (for mad he is becoming, my beloved master, he that had so magnificent a head!) dead set against him! And I am to serve them supper at once. I don't know which way to turn. Divine goodness! is it not lucky that no one may go into the master's room but myself—what would happen if he heard a word of all this! *Ah, pecaïre!* 'Supper,' says Mademoiselle, and the *coucou* ready again, with the other Tarbes, in an hour."

The major-domo made for the door; stopped, clacked his tongue, ran back, caught up my muddy clothes, and was gone in a whirlwind.

Silence and loneliness closed about me once more; and something besides my own self-pity now clutched at my heart. It was the sense of tragedy in the house; an indescribable feeling as of menace and anguish rising silently about the place.

Out on the open downs Louvecelle had been under some such dread; now for her the spell was happily broken, she was warm and confident by her lover's side; preparing for her great cast of the die in her splendid adventure. I knew enough of her to feel sure that it

was nothing less to her. But the spell had now fallen upon me—in this quiet, firelit, familiar room—creeping, cold, intangible, like the mists blurring everything; chilling to the bone, a brake upon the pulse of life. . . .

I had just risen to my feet, under some unreasoned impulse to get away from the misery, when there came a sharp knock at my door. And, immediately upon my cry of "Come in!" the door was thrown wide open and Adrienne was standing on the threshold!

She was clad as I had never seen her; in some dark travelling garments out of which her face, above the long beautiful throat, rose, I thought, like a lovely white flower. She was pale, yet her lips curved into smiles. And though her eyes shone with a wonderful lustre, they looked darker, more shadowed than usual, as they moved with a sort of restlessness from my face, about the room, and back to me. She spoke, however, with the utmost gaiety.

"What has become of you, Mr. de Quercy? Supper is ready.—Ah, I see." Her glance ran me up and down. Her accents assumed the old banter—yet there was an effort, and I felt the anxiety underlying. "I see. How fine you are! And my poor cousin down below—brushing is no use: that white stuff clings, and besides he is all torn! Now, you and your rich wardrobe—heavens, how many suits have I not seen on you! You will have to lend him a decent outer coat, to cover him up. Yes, and a hat too. What do I say, lend? You will have to give him all those things, Mr. de Quercy. And I don't mind asking: it is not too much to ask you to do for a man whose life you have already twice saved!"

I pointed my full appreciation of the argument by an involuntary laugh. She laughed too; then suddenly became grave:

"You see, my friend," she said, "I go on taking you at your word."

"Mademoiselle," I cried, "give me but the time to get my riding-coat from the press—and my only remaining hat from the shelf. Gloves?—and a stock?"

"Yes, certainly. Hurry, Mr. de Quercy!"

She had still the wide smile when I came back to her with the redingote over my arm, the hat and the other things in my hand.

"It is perfect!" Her eye wandered past me. "I am grateful beyond words."

Her tone, however, conveyed an impression that she scarce knew what she was saying. Now, with a new briskness, she ordered me to take the garments down to the library, where I should find Enguerrand—thus she continued to name her Loup-Cervier.

"I will rejoin you," she went on, "in a few minutes. I have bethought myself I must leave a letter for poor cousin Gontran—just a few lines—he will be able to read them, some day, soon."

She went with me to the head of the stairs, talking all the while; rather feverishly I thought.

"I don't like leaving him. But it must be. Oh, it would be infinitely worse if I did not go. I will bring him back his son, some day. Some day," she repeated. "Everything will soon be made clear. He always meant me to marry his son. Perhaps you know that. Yes, I think you do. It has been his dream—and, please God, it shall come right. It shall come right for him—for us! I cannot pause now, I must go straight on. Begin supper, please, both of you: there is hurry."

Yet, though she urged, she remained at the top of the winding stairs, watching me as I went down; and the last impression I carried with me was the brooding darkness of her gaze. "She feels she is planning madness," I said to myself. "And mad it is. God knows what will be the end of it all!"

"Capital, Quercy, my good fellow!" exclaimed Montbars as I entered the library with my load. "Capital!"

He was standing with his back to the fire—just as I had so often seen the old Comte stand. And in the poise of the head, in the movement of the hands; in the whole outline of the figure, for all its youthful

elasticity and vigour, there was something irresistibly reminiscent of the father—so potent is the stamp of race, even in this case where all traditional influences had been absent. He fitted the post by the hearth as if he had been bred under this roof which had only known his presence one day. Even the little gesture, as he greeted me, genial and yet condescending, recalled that of the old man.

"Capital," repeated Enguerrand—for so it is perhaps best I should call him at this stage, although to me, I will not deny, he remains to this day the Montbars of my first acquaintance—"what a stroke of luck we should be so closely of a size, my dear Quercy! A hat with a right English brim!"

He took it from my hand, set it on his black pate with a knowing cock, laughed like a boy, and tossed it on the chair behind him. . . .

"Gloves, too—and a white stock! Gad, I shall look an undeniable *milord!* I shall be able to threaten haughty Britannic reprisals, if any one dares to question me!"

But I could not meet him on this note, my spirits remained as heavy as lead.

"Mademoiselle requests," I said, dully, "that you will begin supper without waiting for her."

A round table was laid by the chimney corner, and already spread with a covered soup-tureen.

"Right. Take that seat, Quercy," said he, playing the host with perfect ease. "Let me help you—the excellent Louradour has, I understand, gone cellar-wards." He gave me a quick mischievous look. "Fact is, I had a fancy to-night, for white wine, as I told him. Burgundy is the right stuff for him who has to sit by the fire and ruminate—there is some, by the way, warming down there, if you prefer it—yes, a splendid preparation for the armchair. Not bad, either, for a hard day's chase; staying power lies in Burgundy. But to set the wits at the keenest, to wind a man's nerve for combined cunning and daring, give me a bottle of *Yquem.* I defy any one to moon or blunder after a few glasses of

that straw-coloured ambrosia! Now, what have they served us here? By the steam of it, it seems acceptable—and faith, I am hungry. Pass me your plate, dear friend."

Yes, he was most absolutely at home—the son of the house, doing the honours with grace! Before I had taken more than a few spoonfuls of *potage Richelieu*—I can still remember the savoury strength of it—Louradour entered upon us, bearing in each hand a cobwebby bottle. And close upon him came Adrienne, carrying a small case in her hand—jewel or dispatch box—which she deposited on the chair beside Montbars' hat.

She slipped into her seat, without a word; smiling to see her lover in possession; silently received her plate from him, made her sign of the Cross and said a little grace to herself. He gazed at her while she did so, his quizzical eyes bright with admiration. Louradour placed one of his bottles on the mantel-shelf, and drew the cork from the other, wiping the neck of it with a whisk of his napkin. Never was there a scene of quieter domestic cheer—who could have guessed at the past tragedy of this day, and the one still to come, and the immense issues at stake for so many lives?

Only Louradour and I—personally the least concerned in the situation—betrayed a sense of its weight. I could not muster courage for talk. The poor fellow's face was marked with the patches of mental agitation; his hand shook, his eye rolled from one to the other of us. And when Adrienne suddenly called to him to be quick and "fill the glass of M. Enguerrand," he started, almost dropped the flagon and spilled some of the precious liquor on the cloth.

"Ah, Mademoiselle," he said piteously, "it is really that I do not know where my head is going! Monseigneur upstairs, so ill—and he, to have forbidden me to admit M. Montbars—I beg pardon, Mademoiselle, you would wish me to say: M. le Vicomte—but Monseigneur's orders were distinct, and here am I, serving M. Montbars himself with my master's bread and wine!"

"You are serving your master's son," said Adrienne with grave severity.

Louradour made no reply. His mouth went down at the corners like that of a child struggling with tears. With trembling hand, he began to pour the amber wine in Montbars' glass; the bottle clicked against the rim.

"You and I, Louradour, will know each other better one day," said the heir jovially.

But the joviality fell flat. In spite of the lovers' high spirits, something of the cold menace that had oppressed me upstairs was beginning to pervade the atmosphere. Adrienne told the butler sharply to hurry on with the service; and she interrupted Montbars in the midst of some mocking reminiscence of his struggle in the caves, with a warning that time was pressing, that he had best employ it in eating. And there is no denying that, when, a few moments later, a sound of horses' hoofs rose from the courtyard, we all three looked at each other with scared faces. In those days of ruthless dealings with political crimes, the mental vision of a possible mounted gendarme halting at the door had always a sinister significance.

"Bah, it is only our chaise," said Montbars, tossing his own transient anxiety aside, with a note of joy in his voice and an ardent look at Louvecelle. "And the sooner the better, for me."

She sat, her fork poised in the air, straining her ear —the image of intentness.

"No—not the chaise. Some one has ridden in, and in great haste," she said, and started to her feet.

"Shall I run down and see what it is?" asked Louradour. He looked dreadfully perturbed.

"No—no!" cried Adrienne sharply. "Oh, Loup-Cervier, how can you sit like that! This may be——"

"The gendarmes?" he answered incredulously. "Track me here? Impossible, my darling."

At the dreaded word, Louradour's jaw dropped. He looked, in agonized perplexity from Montbars to Adrienne.

"The gendarmes—at Castel-Rozac!" he murmured. "At Castel-Rozac, no, that is not to be believed!"

Although, presently, the belated visitor turned out to be no more alarming a personage than the excellent Roubilliac, his first words on entering the room were not calculated to allay the general misgivings. He came in with the swift steps of the man bent on a business that admits of no delay. He cast a comprehensive glance about him; acknowledged Montbars' greeting with a gesture of intense relief, and straightway said:

"M. Montbars, I am overjoyed to find you here—though I did not expect it—I shall be still more glad to know you well out of the district, and the sooner the better! Millac is all of a stir with a squad of gendarmes looking for you. Your room is in possession of an agent. I rode as fast as I could to inform Mademoiselle—thinking she might have some means of warning you. I see my idea was sound enough.—A little feast? I am sorry to have to interrupt it. But, if you care for your own life and for—for all it means to other people—there is but one course now. That is *presto* over the frontier! Off with you, without a moment's unnecessary delay! Off, while you have the night in your favour!"

In a silent manner, unusual with him, Enguerrand rose, made a courteous bow to the speaker, and stretched out his arm towards Adrienne. She flew to him with the swiftness of a homing bird, and he clasped her close.

"Let us go, then," he said.

Roubilliac opened his mouth to speak, shut it again, scratched his jaw, shrugged his shoulders. I think he was, as once before, measuring the complete uselessness of any attempt at interference. But Louradour flung out both hands with a wail of objurgations, frenzied appeals; and rushed to place himself between them and the door.

"In the name of heaven, he is never going to take our young lady with him? Oh, M. le docteur! Oh, M. de Quercy, your honour! You are the friends of Monseigneur! Monseigneur loves you so much, Mr. de Quercy, like a son, I may say, sir! You cannot allow Mademoiselle to depart with—with this strange gentleman—and, ah *pecaïre*, the gendarmes after him!"

"Come, come, my good fellow," exclaimed Montbars; and as he spoke he was donning my coat, "stop miauling, and help me on with this."

"My good Louradour!" expostulated Adrienne. She put out a hand and laid it gently on the old servant's sleeve.

It was a fatal delay. Had it not been for the poor, well-meaning Gascon's interference, another moment would have seen the betrothed safely out of the room. And the house of Castel-Rozac would have been spared its final catastrophe.

There was a pause, while Louradour slowly yielded to the pressure of his young mistress's authority. Enguerrand, clad now in all my garments, came up again and offered his arm to her.

"My cloaks are in the hall," she whispered, taking up her dispatch box. "The packages are in the chaise. All is ready." Then turning to Louradour: "What you can do for me is to take care—loving care, Louradour, of my old Brisco!"

Montbars opened the door, from which the majordomo had at last drawn away.

"Ah, Mademoiselle!" pleaded the old servant for the last time, clasping his hands, the tears running down his cheek. All at once a look of terror convulsed his features; his eyes became fixed:

"What is that?" he said in a sharp whisper; pushed the door open more widely, stared out into the passage and staggered back: "Divine goodness, here is Monseigneur!"

CHAPTER XVIII

MEETING AND PARTING

We could hear the beat of slippered feet along the flags for some seconds before the figure of the old seigneur of Castel-Rozac came within our view. In the dimly-lit passage, his face was capriciously illumined by the trailing flame of the candle he held above his head.

The whole circle of us, by the doorway, retreated involuntarily before his advance: there was something almost unearthly about the apparition. The death-white countenance, frowning, lined with concentrated fury, seemed, in some paradoxical manner, to be actually black with menace. I had always known him as a thin tall man; now he appeared to be of more than human height; of more than credible emaciation. He had cast loosely over his shoulders a wide purple dressing-gown; save for that and slippers on his feet, he was just as he had risen from his couch—in his night-shirt. Yet there was nothing ludicrous about him: no more could the sight of his fleshless chest exposed by the open shirt, or of the terribly lean limbs moving beneath it, provoke a smile, than if a spectre had risen amongst us in his grave-clothes.

In later days, Roubilliac explained to me why he himself had stood back with the rest of us. "I thought at first," he said, "my poor old patient was sleep-walking; and that to awaken him might cause a deadly shock."

But, as I watched him with fascinated gaze, it was clear enough to me that the Comte de Ruffeleu was terribly awake. Awake, and moved by a relentless

purpose. Through what extraordinary intelligence of the spirit had he become aware of Montbars' presence in his house that night? It will ever remain one of those mysteries for which there is no rational explanation. By some inexplicable process, the disordered brain, possessed by so overwhelming and so unnatural an antipathy, had gained clairvoyance. From the very threshold his restless eyes fell upon Montbars; and from that moment his gaze became fixed—no one else existed for him. He came forward with slow, resistless steps, and the young man fell back before him, to the middle of the room.

"Cousin Gontran!" exclaimed Adrienne, and tried to cast herself between them; but Roubilliac drew her back.

The Comte had not even seemed to hear. Having reached the table, he placed his candle upon it; threw down his dressing-gown with a magnificent gesture, and stepped out in his strange garb, as grandly as if he had been a knight in the *champs-clos* of honour. It was then we saw that he had, under his left arm, a pair of rapiers—old-world Court swords, silver-hilted, with slender blades unsheathed.

He took the weapons, one in each hand—those ivory hands I had so often admired as they hovered delicately over the chess-board—balanced and compared them a second; then, turning one over and holding it by the blade, proffered it to the young man with the same haughty magnificence.

He spoke now, and I understood, for the first time, perhaps, what a terrible force lay behind these long-nursed traditions. The whole lost *superbe* of the French noblesse reared itself in that feeble old man.

"Sir," he said, and his accents rang with an acerbated arrogance that was like the hiss of a whip, "you have defied my formally expressed desire that you should not present yourself in my house again. I could have you batooned and thrown out by my lackeys. But, since it appears that you have dared to lift your eyes up to a lady of my family, I prefer to concede to you

the privileges of a gentleman. Take that sword, and defend yourself."

If any of us had thought of interfering, I do not believe we could have moved. We were helplessly outside the circle of passion and horror which encompassed those two.

Montbars, the master hitherto of every situation, who had bandied irony with death itself, was not master of this moment. Utter discomposure had hold of him. I saw the sweat break on his forehead ; saw the splendid healthy olive of his cheek turn livid. Under the cutting tone and the insulting words he had bared his teeth for a second, but bitten back the fierce retort. Now, as the sword-hilt was held out to him, he receded again, and with both hands made a wild gesture of refusal. The weapon fell clattering between them. And the Comte's voice rose again :

"How ! Do you shirk the honour which I—I, Ruffeleu—offer you ? Then, cur, take a cur's punishment !"

He gave a loud laugh. Terrible to look at, terrible to hear, he towered in his delirium of pride, a gaunt, fantastic, half-naked figure. His wolf-crest was bristling. He fiercely struck the Loup-Cervier across the face with the flat of his sword.

"*Mort-Dieu !*——"

In a kind of sob of fury the oath leaped from Montbars' mouth. His eye flashed red. I saw him raise both his hands clenched and shake them over his head. Adrienne gave a piercing scream :

"Enguerrand !——"

The Comte turned his head wildly from side to side ; and his eyes, a moment before lit with such insane fires, peered now like those of one who, suddenly, cannot see.

"Who said Enguerrand ?"

It was a piteous broken cry. Montbars' uplifted hands dropped to his side. And, as though felled, he sank on his knees.

"My father !——"

The words came hoarsely ; scarce audible. But they

pierced straight to the mind and heart of the poor distraught old lord. He gave a groan that was barely human, and would have fallen his whole length but that Roubilliac was ready to catch him.

This culmination was only what the doctor had dreaded for days—the Comte de Ruffeleu's second stroke! Louradour rushed to his assistance. Between them, they laid the limp gaunt figure upon the floor.

"Before God!" exclaimed Montbars, springing to his feet—his tone was harsh and angry; and I saw the livid blue and red weal left on his cheek by the blow—"before God, I was patient! No one shall throw the blame of this on me!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, be gone!" The doctor spoke with exasperation, the while, with professional deftness he slipped a cushion under the unconscious white head. "Begone, young man—or this day Castel-Rozac may see the end of both father and son!"

"Yes, come!" said Adrienne.

She was set and pale, but quite self-controlled. She took up her dispatch-box, laid her hand on Montbars' arm and drew him from the room. On the threshold she paused, however, and cast a last long look upon the prostrate figure over which Louradour, as he reverently covered it with the cloak, was sobbing like a child.

The Comte de Ruffeleu—who had ever been so imposing a personality, easily dominating by high-breeding, dignity, and patrician courtesy, whatever company he might be in; who, a few moments ago, had in his wrath struck terror and awe into every heart of us—lay now a mere stricken image of old age, a shell of manhood robbed of the proud spirit, helpless as an infant—a thing of infinite pathos. The girl's face quivered with a moment's anguish. Then her determination returned, and she closed the door softly. Dumbly Montbars let himself be guided; they were gone.

Not a word for me, not a look, not a thought! Even now, as I con over these reminiscences, I am conscious that the bitterness of that moment—aye, and the

persistent humiliation of the part which had been imposed on me, have not faded from my soul. Like the burden of some lamentable ballad, the words recur at the end of every verse:

They had no thought for me!

In the passionate episode of their tangled love-story, it had been my hand that had, time and again, averted disaster. Yet the lovers, in their superb *égoisme à deux*, ever went on their way absorbed wholly in each other . . . carrying out, in fact, to the letter those careless words of Louvecelle I had overheard on the bluff: "Only a wandering young Englishman, so we may dismiss him."

As I stood by the deserted supper-table, and felt the cold edge of that ingratitude cut me to the heart, the cadence of the Tarbes' hoofs and the rumble of wheels in the courtyard rose, waned, and vanished. And I knew that those two whom I had so strangely grown to love had both passed out of my life, and were on their way through the world together.—Little did I think how my dismissed personality was still to serve them, and with what particular results.

Louradour had disappeared, to return marshalling a melancholy procession of men, drawn from stable and kitchen, who brought in a mattress. On this, under Roubilliac's direction, my unfortunate host was placed, and reverently carried away.

As they filed out of the room, I could not keep my thoughts from flying back to the scene of two days ago amid the ruins—the Ancient of Langévol, cursing, whining, and lamenting, on the shoulders of his grandsons. And, again, to that of this very day, the mean bundle of bones and clothes flung upon the white mud of the cavern. . . . What curious fatality was it that thus linked in disaster, within a few hours, these two old men who had scorned and loathed each other from their wide-severed places in the social scale—the solitary grand seigneur and the patriarchal ruffian!

I was left alone. Roubilliac had positively snarled

a denial at me when I tentatively proffered my services. And, indeed, what could I have done?

How can I say what thoughts crowded on me, as the minutes dropped in the abyss of Time and became a desolate hour! I could not make up my mind to leave the library. It seemed to me that the day was still unaccomplished, that something was bound yet to occur in which I had to play my part. I felt restless, yet numb. Images passed and repassed, fleeting or obtrusive, all weary, before my mind. Now it was the Comte, abandoned by his own, stretched helpless on that couch upstairs, which was possibly, ere very long, to be his death-bed. . . . Now it was the great low room at the Louveterie, where I could see, in thought, the bodies of those dead Giscourts we had left in the caves, laid side by side upon the refectory table, being made ready for the grave. . . . Lourador had described once the savage funeral rites over the lad who had broken his neck—the wails, the dirge sounds of the horn. I could fancy now the pandemonium that must fill the gaunt new house at this very hour: the savage howls of grief, the fury, the calls for vengeance!

I knew neither pity nor horror—only fatigue. I thought of my old host, whose pathetic attachment to me had evoked an almost filial response in my heart; I thought of him abandoned, probably dying . . . so tortured all his life by his silent sorrow, to be mocked at the end of it by the very fulfilment of his master wish; thwarted in his paternity, betrayed by the very instinct of his own blood. It was very horrible. I saw it clearly enough, yet without a pang. Neither did the successive terrors of the day, as again and again they passed before me, evoke as much as a shudder. I was simply a dazed spectator. I looked at my hand, and recalled that it had struck down a fellow-creature, and only wondered, quite impersonally, if this Thibaut, with whom I had drunk wine, were dead; if I had really the life of a man on my conscience. But one thing was certain: I did not care.

I was pacing the room mechanically, absently, when

there came sounds at the door—sounds that I remembered had once filled me with fear. It was Brisco's deep, snorting, investigating breath. I let him in, glad of his company. He looked very splendid; larger than usual, with his coat roughened after his wash—they, evidently, had ministered to him in the servants' quarters, on his return so unwontedly soiled by the white slime. The thought came to me that it was truly a matter for congratulation that he should not have been present at the conflict between his master and his good friend, though I could make no surmise as to the part he might have acted at such a juncture.

The noble beast went two or three times round the room; sniffed at the chair where his mistress had sat at table, and at the place where she had stood last by the door. Then he walked slowly up to me, and stared up inquiringly, with his great cairngorm eyes.

"Yes," I said, "she is gone, old man. Gone! She has left us. But she did spare a thought for you. None for me, and yet she called me her dog too!"

He hung his great head, as if he understood. He understood, at least, that there was sadness toward; then turned to the earth and flung himself down with a long sigh, to wait.

"You are a philosopher, Brisco; I will try and imitate you," said I; drew up an armchair, threw more logs on the fire, sat down and stretched my feet to the warmth.

I saw the twitch of his bushy brows over the alertly watchful eyes; and, ever and anon, the sensitive pricking of his ears. I knew he was listening for the step that was so little likely ever to come back. No, we were neither of us philosophers; only one of us still hoped, but it was not I. My dulled sensibility was breaking up: I could have shed tears over myself, but that I would not forego my manhood so far, even with only the dog for witness! And, presently, when Louradour broke in upon us in an abandoned state of blubbering, the hidden springs of my own emotion dried away at their very source: there is nothing so

styptic as the sight of another's lack of self-control. Yet he had cause enough for woe, poor faithful soul. Blow had fallen upon blow.

"Sir," he exclaimed—his lips were trembling, his healthy olive face was ashen—"she has gone, after all! Mademoiselle has gone off! She has driven away with M. Montbars—the gentleman who she believes is Monseigneur's son! She is gone with him, your honour! Gone like that! And—oh, M. le docteur may say what he likes, I know that Monseigneur is dying. I took upon myself to send for M. l'Abbé, and he is with him. But Monseigneur's eyes are still closed. I don't know if he can even hear."

Louradour put his sleeve across his face and wept aloud. I had nothing to say, no word of consolation to offer. I turned my face away from him and gazed into the fire—the sight of a man so broken down has something humiliating even for the onlooker.

"His honour knew our young lady was going away with his friend?"

Louradour had drawn close to me; there was indignation and a profound reproach in his voice.

"Mademoiselle did not confide in me," I said, shortly.

"Ah, sir," the major-domo's accents were again entirely tearful, "what a bird of misfortune, that M. Montbars!" He bent again to whisper, as he had done in my bedroom. "Your honour does not believe, does he, that it is really our M. Enguerrand? An impostor, sir, is it not? And the gendarmes looking for him! And Mademoiselle—oh, I could pray," cried the old servant, wringing his hands, "that Monseigneur might never come back to consciousness, to learn the terrible things that have happened in his noble house!"

I had at last to look at his poor disfigured countenance as I answered him.

"Louradour, I solemnly believe, nay, I know, that M. Montbars is the Vicomte Enguerrand de Ruffeleu. And so does Dr. Roubilliac."

He remained open-mouthed for a few seconds, while

the import of my words filtered to his brain. Then he burst forth into fresh lamentations.

"My God, my God! And it was his own son then, that Monseigneur wanted to kill!—that he struck across the face! Ah, what misery! Whichever way it is, we are terribly afflicted!"

Brisco, his head between his paws, lay watching us, striving no doubt, in his dumb way, to piece out what all this grievous trouble was, with an air of ever profounder depression.

The doctor's heavy, hasty tread could be heard coming down the passage. Louradour drew away from me, and began mechanically to pile the plates on the supper-table.

"*Holà*," cried Roubilliac on entering, "leave all that alone, if you please! *Que diantre!* I must have a morsel of supper. I——" He stopped and glanced keenly at the butler; then caught up a glass of wine from the table—I believe it was mine—and bade him drink it. "What the devil, pull yourself together, friend Louradour! You'll be wanted in your master's room. I have established Madame Rivarol there, with instructions. But she cannot manage alone. Leave all that, I say, and go."

Brisco half rose; but, as Louradour rushed from the room, slamming the door after him, let himself fall again with another of his long sighs.

Roubilliac sat down squarely at the table, and began to devour *pâté*, washed down by Château Yquem, with the energy of a man whose meals are an important part of the day's duties. Munching, he flung disjointed observations at me.

"What, in the devil's name—what possessed you to bring the fellow back here to-night? If the old man does not die of it, it is because—because, by God's mercy, I happened to be on the spot, this time, and able to bleed him at once." He shook his head, frowning blackly. "The second stroke! It was my business to ward off that second stroke; and I would have done it, too, but for that scatterbrain—bah! Yes, the old man

had come so well through the first, with ordinary precautions he ought to have gone on for years. Years. Now——"

Roubilliac thrust out his lip disgustedly and shook his head.

"But," I cried, and was poignantly aware how fond I had grown to be of my host, "you said, just now, he would not die of it!"

"No, sir. He will not die of it—yet. But when the outer ramparts have fallen, the citadel——" He touched his forehead, looking at me with rueful eyes. "I foresaw it. I warned that young *chouan* of misfortune! My word, my word! To kill a father on the first day of meeting—a pretty way to establish the filial claim! And you, did I not warn you? Come, you at least are not out of your five senses with love—why did you not do your duty? Why did you not prevent this, Mr. de Quercy? What bewitched the young man, anyhow?"

"He could not return to Millac to-night," said I. "You yourself——"

"I know that, sir," exploded the doctor. "But what was he doing here to-day at all? He ought to have been off, clear of the country, he ought——"

"He was after his gold," I interrupted bluntly.

Roubilliac put down his knife and fork and glared at me. Once again I had a fine tale to tell, with Langévol for a background. And there was no reason at all, now, why it should not be told. It was, besides, a distinct relief to unburden myself; and there was, perhaps, also a secret desire to make it clear that I was not quite so negligible a person as my friend's treatment of me might indicate.

At first the doctor listened with a sardonic smile. I thought him, then, very bad-tempered, but I have since learned to take at its true value the irascibility that only springs from anxiety and soreness of heart. Presently, his eyes grew round. His forehead crimsoned. Exclamations escaped him, none of them complimentary either to myself or to Montbars.—"Raving lunatics,"

"wanton young idiots," were the mildest of his terms. He thumped the table with the handle of his knife.

In spite, however, of his wrath, which was genuine, there was something in the gaze he now fixed on me, in the breathless attention with which he listened, that flattered my wounded self-esteem.

Once he cried that we ought to have been ashamed of ourselves, two gentlemen, to bring a lady into such peril. And upon my drily remarking that I rather thought "the boot was on the other leg" (for which idiomatic saying I gave him my best French version) he broke into abrupt laughter, and declared on his side that he had always known that Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu had the devil in her—"*le diable au corps*" was the expression he used.

When I came to the Homeric *dénouement*, and left at least six Giscourts, most of them, possibly all, dead on the floor of the cave, and the Wolf-Master at the bottom of the underground waters, he could contain himself no longer. He rose from the table, threw down his napkin, and began to stump about the room. His first impulse had been to cry out :

"Come, come, young man, what are you stuffing me with ?"

But in the midst of his own phrase he broke off, and looked at me with a new expression of profound disquietude.

"And let me tell you, Mr. de Quercy," he said, stopping in front of me, "that it would be more wholesome to have a swarm of hornets about your head—to meet a pack of starving wolves out on the Causses—than to have the Giscourt tribe on your track for blood vengeance! Heavens above! It is a mercy, anyhow, that those two other madcaps are off already—and I hope well away by this time! Your friend"—there was something almost comic in the manner in which the responsibility for Montbars' appearance on the scene was cast upon me—"your friend has had his warning, and, thank God, whichever way he has gone, it will not be anywhere near Millac. I'll give him that credit,"

pursued Roubilliac, and he seemed to be speaking more to himself than to me, "the scamp is foolhardy, but he is no fool. As for you," wheeling again upon me, "as for you, Mr. de Quercy, you have let yourself be mixed up in other people's difficulties in a way that scarce does credit to your judgment. You are crazy neither for love, as I said, nor for gold; what the deuce——" He stopped and flung a gesture of two fingers towards the door. "There is only one thing for you to do. That is to fly at once. Yes, I said fly. Off with you! Pack your knapsack and away! This very night—aye, and without a moment's delay. Without a word to any one. Begone, as you came—on foot. Begone in the night, no one knowing where. Yes, in the night, that is all-important. Yes, and on foot, my good young man——"

He halted, and put his finger reflectively to his brow.

"I will plan a route for you. I will think it all out and have it ready for you. Meanwhile, hurry up to your room, and pack."

"But, doctor——" I began; and then, being very weary and down at heart, I broke in my turn into irascibility. "To-night—I'll certainly not go to-night," I declared. "I'll be hanged if I stir a foot."

The burly doctor marched back upon me, halting so close that his curving waistcoat touched my chest.

"Now look here," he said, "you do not understand the situation one bit. The Langévol people—and there is a fair band of them left—are out for the lot of you young cave-explorers. Out for murder, I tell you. And, by the same token, I understand now why I met so many of them abroad to-night. There were two riding into the village, as I left. I crossed a couple more in the wood. And I'm not sure that it was not another of them I saw lurking by the ravine corner. They're drawing the whole country round Millac, for Montbars, that's clear enough. Drawing it as cunningly as ever they did for any wolf, be sure of that. And be sure, also, that they never went after wolf with such

ferocity as they will after you, if you are to be found in the country. They are not the kind to set the gendarmes to run down the slayers of their patriarch, their father, their brothers, and the holders of their secret. They are the last people to invoke the help of the law—they'll do the suppressing themselves, if they can, no mistake about that, be quite certain. Montbars—and, now as it turns out, Heaven be praised, Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu also—had a good start. They'll escape. But if you want to escape too, take the chance that is offered you. I would not give that for your life, not that"—he snapped his fingers—"if to-morrow's light finds you still in the district. When they realize they have drawn blank for Montbars round Millac, they'll be hot on your scent, up here."

Perhaps he saw that I was still unconvinced, for he suddenly changed his tone:

"Understand," he said, now with sharp authoritativeness, "that if you do not feel inclined to go for your own sake, you will have to go for the sake of the sick man upstairs. I will not have the Giscourt crew raiding Castel-Rozac to get at your scalp. How do you think we could protect you? Louradour with the blunderbuss, and I with my lancet? They'd murder you, lad, I repeat, as sure as I am speaking to you. And anyhow I will have no commotion here—what of my patient? No, we'll have no commotion, here!"

He paused a moment, reflectively.

"We must have it spread this very night that Mademoiselle has left—suddenly called away, dying relative, anything, gone, anyway. Our innkeeper of the *Golden Rose* below will have the news up and down the road, sure enough. He will also be told that you have departed—that is, after you are well on your way, whither, no one knows. But gone the Englishman is. Only M. le Comte left at the castle—ill in bed."

"Of course," said I, a little sullenly, I fear, "if you put it that way, there is nothing for it, though I am very tired, and my head is bad——"

"Nothing for it; the devil drives!" Roubilliac put

in, promptly, clapping me on the shoulder. "Come, lad, to your room with you. Into your touring clothes, *presto!* I'll have your luggage packed and sent after you later. Meanwhile see to your knapsack. Good God," he cried, with a fresh burst of petulance, "what is there in this melancholy, stricken house of Rozac to make you pull such a long face over leaving it?"

I hardly knew myself. It was the most unreasonable feeling in the world. But the thought of going forth into the night, alone, seemed to give the final touch to my forlornness. And as I went upstairs, obediently, Roubilliac's words rang still in my ears:

"Good God, what is there in this melancholy, stricken house . . .?"

What was there, indeed, that I should feel the snapping of the last thread that bound me to Ruffeleu de Castel-Rozac as a kind of agony? I could not in decency have prolonged my stay in any case beyond a few days; but my heart smote me at the thought of this universal abandonment of the sick man. I would have liked to know him out of danger. . . . And, yes, I yearned for some sign of thanks, of farewell from the two I had served in their love adventure. I held to the vague hope that I would yet receive this. . . . When? Perhaps, when the chaise was sent back, there might come with it a message for me, a token. . . . Anyhow, she would surely write, to Roubilliac if not to me. . . .

And, to tell the truth, I clung to the very stones of the house where I had lived these few weeks of her life. Amid such emotions there is no room for mere reasoning. God knows it was a melancholy house, but God knows too that never had I felt such melancholy within myself as on this night of my enforced departure.

The doctor had prepared, as he promised, a cunning little itinerary for me. He had even devised a sketch-map, very simple and clear, on which he had traced not only my first stage, but that of the two successive days, when I was to reach Rodez and there find my personal luggage—he would see to that—at the Hotel de la Sirène.

The first and all-important affair, he explained, when I rejoined him in the library, was to get away from this neighbourhood under cover of night.

"In daylight, on our chalky roads, or across our bare downs," he said, "you would be as plain to see as an ant on a white tablecloth. After the first *étape*, however, the way will be comparatively safe. The first *étape* is what matters, and I have hit upon the very thing for you. Our wild people of the Causse are not among the safest for a lonely traveller either—well, no, they're not! But there's the widow Cazalet—yes, *mère* Cazalet's farm-house is the very place."

About three hours' walk (he went on in detail) on a fair road over the hill range would bring me to the farm of this widow Cazalet. I was to knock without fear, saying I brought a message from Dr. Roubilliac. That would be enough. *Mère* Cazalat owed him a good turn—one of those good turns a woman does not forget. And she was discreet and shrewd. All I had to do was to hand her this letter. . . .

The next day, after a lusty march across the Causse, I would find myself at Sazerac, practically safe from any running down by Giscourts. Then all would be plain sailing. He was, however, most particular in making my course for this night clear. I would sleep at the farm-house, and tramp on to Sazerac. From Sazerac he strongly advised the use of the *diligence* to Rodez; then the *malle-poste* to Paris.

"And thence, if you'll believe me, young man, so to England."

It was very complete. I could find no flaw in the scheme. I had nothing to complain of; the pedestrian task was in no way heavier than my original plan of a walking tour. I would find my luggage in due course. It was only a matter of fatigue.

"A night's fatigue," said Roubilliac tersely, "against the all but certainty of a shot in the head, within the next few days."

He pulled out a bundle of rather dirty Bank of France notes, with which he was anxious to assist my departure.

When, however, he found that I was more than well provided with money, his anxiety took another turn. He warned me solemnly against showing my English gold promiscuously.

He accompanied me into the hall, and he himself helped me on with my overcoat. But the moment he beheld me in it—it was a many-caped town garment of Stultz's most dashing cut—he fell back two steps, put his arms akimbo and objurgated :

"And—upon my word!—you want to have your throat cut at the first cross-roads?—play the milord lost on the highway for every wandering marauder to mark? You want to pass like a meteor through the district, so that the Giscourts cannot possibly fail to track you? Ah, yes, that's it!—Put me on that coat—eh, and that dandified fur cap—finest seal, is it not? with red satin lining. That'll be perfect. That'll complete the whole thing! Your passage will be talked of from one end of Rouergue to the other."

I flung the cap pettishly on the table.

"What am I to do, then?" I cried. "That is all Montbars has left me of my wardrobe."

"*Peste*, is that so?"

The doctor thrust out his jaw ; scratched it after his fashion when perplexed. Then, saying that, on reflection, none of my English garbing would have done, in any case, bade me wait for him where I was, and disappeared.

A few minutes later he came back with an air of triumph. He was breathing hard ; he had certainly been expeditious. Over his arm he carried a rough kind of grey cloak such as I had seen the peasants wear on the hills. Ample, circular in shape, reaching well below the knees, it also boasted a hood—a practical wrap, if ever one was devised, for rough weather. He also brought a broad felt hat of dun colour and nondescript shape ; it had seen service but was still tolerably decent. Both these articles of clothing were distinctly redolent of the stable, and I confess that it was with some disfavour that I took them from him.

"Come, come!"

The doctor was not the man to let my fine-gentleman fastidiousness interfere with his well-thought-out precautions, and so he roundly told me. He pulled Stultz's tasteful handiwork off my shoulders, and cast it on the table beside the natty cap, then buckled me into the native cloak.

"You will find," he said drily, "all your London elegances of attire at Rodez. Then you can travel on to Paris as much like a milord as you please."

Excellent fellow. He even insisted on winding a faded silk comforter of his own round my neck, which added an aroma of snuff to the *bouquet d'écurie* that already enveloped me.

"And now, *bon voyage!*" he cried, with a good humour that hid perhaps a little emotion, taking my hand the while and shaking it with extraordinary vigour.

"But my pistols! And, good lord!" I exclaimed, "with all your foresight, doctor, you would bundle me off without my passport!"

"The deuce! Yes, indeed, your papers! As for your pistols, I am not so sure, seeing the way you have of getting into trouble with them, whether you might not be safer without. Well, there they are. Hide them away. But your papers—where are they? Ah, here, I feel something."

He helped me to empty the pockets of the condemned overcoat, in which I had carefully pinned the precious and indispensable "papiers." He helped me—I smile to think of it now—to place the strong vellum envelope, in which I was careful to keep my passport, my permit, and some other documents of identification, securely in the inner pocket of my coat. At last he handed me my stick and—he had thought of everything—his own dark lantern, which, by the warmth of it, I found was ready lit. This I was to leave for him, he was particular to impress on me, at *mère* Cazalet's.

Then he opened the great nail-studded door, and stood under the porch watching me go forth.

I was to turn by a short cut which avoided the

village and led to the high-road a good way beyond it. It passed for some time through the wood; I could not mistake the path with the help of my lantern. And, above all, I was to avoid the village.

I looked back as I came to the bend of the way, for it would be my last sight, I thought, of Castel-Rozac. And I was glad to see the great door still open, and the round, burly figure of Roubilliac drawn against the dim, tawny light within. I was glad the door had not been shut on me!

High up, on the right, in the dark façade, a window square was faintly illumined. I stopped a moment to fling a farewell thought, perhaps something of a prayer, into that sick-chamber where the old man, who had called me son, lay unconscious of his own desolation.

Then, with a sigh, the depth of which almost surprised me, I plunged down the steep path.

CHAPTER XIX

NIGHT IN THE WASTE

WHILE many of my most exciting experiences during that dramatic month of my life have, as I have said, become blurred through the mists of years, every moment of the long night tramp when I was driven from Castel-Rozac remains to this hour vivid in my memory.

My last thought, as I gave my farewell look at the tall shadow of the castle, reared against the clearing sky, was of the strange decree of fate which bade me leave the place in the same secret, mysterious manner as I had entered it for the first time: at night, on foot, knapsack on my shoulders, stick in hand, by light of lantern, going into the unknown. . . . Entrance and exit had been like the rounding-in of a dream.

But I deliberately drew a bolt in my mind against the weakening of regretful thought. I wanted all my strength, I knew, and all my wits to-night. And, indeed, I did not feel any great confidence, at the moment, in the staying power of the one or the alertness of the other. I had this day gone through trials which might well have unbalanced a man in good health—I who had been so recently discharged from the status of invalid. Mentally, too, I was worn out.

My first impressions, when presently the darkness of the trees began to close in upon me, were purely physical. The downward path was stony and treacherous; I had to pick my way. The wind had all but subsided; but there was still enough of it to keep up a faintly murmuring chant among the pine-tops. Now

and again some crossing branches would rub against each other, sending a kind of groan into the blackness. Startled birds would flap away from my approach; and I confess that the first I came across alarmed me considerably, so mighty a flutter did its blundering wings make in the stillness, till a wild squawk dispelled the lurking thought of possible Giscourts leaping out of ambush.

The while I went, I watched the small pictures revealed by the beam of my dark lantern, like vignette ornaments in the text of a cleverly illustrated page. Here a dying fern-frond trembling over a fallen branch. There the bole of some giant pine, rugged, seamed and cracked, and, close to it, the slender silhouette of a sapling birch, silver-patched. . . . The long fantastic shadows cast along the ground by every jutting stone under the low and level rays. A pool of blackness, revealed as a bramble-brake, the twisted, spreading bough, grey-lichened, of an oak, that brought me a sudden memory of the park at home; and with it, for the first time, a faint home-longing.

I had been tossed to exulting heights, flung down to depths of depression hitherto unknown to my young thought. . . . In steady, reasonable England, I should find stable ground again — something deep-rooted, sturdy, serene—I who had been the sport of feverish, brilliant and uncertain minds. . . . "Well, here I am," I said to myself, "on my way back to England!"

In less than half an hour I had reached the margin of the wood; and there, on my right front, stretched the high-road, straight, grey, and wide. I closed down my lantern, and stepped on to the causeway.

It was the very night for such an expedition as mine. The rain showers had exhausted themselves. The heavens, still flecked, in the pale moonlight, with remnants of clouds riven into strange shapes, were a diaper of starry pools. The wind had now quite fallen. The silence seemed almost as vast as the spaces.

In more normal conditions of mind and frame, this night march would have been rife with interest for me.

But I was, indeed, ill equipped at that hour for any expense of energy. Singularly enough, I felt more nervous on this broad road than in the woods. Although common sense pointed out, even as Louvecelle herself had done on the day of our first meeting, that forest ways were no safe place for the solitary foot-traveller, there had been something friendly and sheltering in the great company of the trees.

Out in the open, with the unknown folds of country spreading on every side immeasurably away in the gloom; with the vast overpowering skies above I felt such an insignificant speck; such an ant, as Roubilliac had said; such a helpless negligible atom, that it seemed as if, should a swooping gust of wind blow me into some hidden hollow, it would make no more difference to the world than the flight of a leaf, or the crushing of a stray beetle.

As I reached a higher stretch of the road, I could hear, far behind me, a few faint village sounds—they came from Rozac, the only seat of life for leagues around—the bark of a dog, the lowing of a calf. And I was more than half tempted to turn back, knock at the door of the *Golden Rose*, and once again crave for the night's shelter that had been denied me on my arrival. . . . I tramped on; but I caught myself yawning, with weary longing for that bed of bracken which, on Louvecelle's word—how long ago it seemed!—was all that the little inn had to offer.

I had, however, a certain fund of sense, in spite of the vagaries into which I had been led by my adventurous friends. And, in spite also of my thwarted love-dream, I had a pretty vigorous desire for life. . . . Above all, had said Roubilliac, the village was to be avoided. I had no mind to fall an easy quarry to one of the wolf-hunters' unerring carbines. So I breasted the rising way with as good a heart as I could muster against the thought of the three hours' tramping still before me.

The crags began to rise sheer on the left; and presently I marked the edge of the bluff where I had

seen etched in black upon the orange of the afterglow the stray meeting of the Louvecelle and the Loup-Cervier. I knew the place at once.

Just then, a long eerie owl-cry circled high above me. It was like a mocking echo of the lover's rally-call. Loup-Cervier's call, I should never hear it again! . . . In spite of my resolution to shut those two out of my mind, I could not help wondering where they might be at this moment—on what road? . . . Was it to be Spain, or England? . . . Strange that I should not even know whither these wild creatures, who had accepted my friendship only to cast it away as one might cast a husk, were winging their flight! . . .

I tramped on, and still on, in great weariness. Past the crag, on the edge of which I had had my first meeting with Adrienne and her canine escort, down which I had swung myself so lustily, brimming with romantic anticipations. . . . I paused but a moment to gaze up at the bluff, ghostly-white under the broad moon's ray. Then on again. And on—until, at last, loomed into view the ruinous arched stone bridge over the river that Roubilliac had set as my landmark.

A furlong beyond the bridge, on the right: there began the straight track that would lead to the farm-house—lead me to rest and to shelter. How short, and simple and straight that black line, ending in a cross, had seemed on paper, as pointed out by the doctor's finger—how long, how undulating and confusing it proved when it came to be trodden, through the night, by my tired feet!

I struck the path and began what I fondly hoped was the last and shorter stage of my march. Soon the indescribable breath of the downs met my nostrils and revived my drooping strength. The world upon which I had entered up there seemed mapped out in pearly grey. The moon had thrust herself free of all ragged fleeces, and rode now silver-clear and wondrous in a limitless ocean of blue. The hour should have been one of rare enjoyment. But, with its fellows, it remains bitten into my mind in the grimmest of lines.

The waste spread as far as eye could reach; to the very horizon it seemed—void; absolutely dead, except for the white mist creeping stealthily close to the ground. Not a tree or bush, not a hillock broke the monotony. It was all blank, featureless, unending . . . and, somehow, evil under the pure relentless vault. I had never thought that moonlight could be cruel, or that any aspect of nature could hold such dread. The "horror of the waste"—the agoraphobia of the psychologist—was hovering over me, numbing my reason.

Not a sound, except, at rare intervals, the faintest wuthering of the wind which would stir the earth-clinging shroud of vapour with something like a shiver of pain. My own footsteps, the tap of my stick upon the thin grass, scarce pierced through the immense silence. But the rhythm to which I forced my steps became within my brain a kind of jingle set to inane phrases.

The heaviness of fatigue passed into an acute sensation. . . . I walked, and still I walked. And, though the waste receded, it was only to gather me ever deeper in itself. . . . I drew no nearer to anything, let alone my goal. And now a new sense grew upon me—of being close pursued, not by tangible flesh-and-blood wolves or Giscourts, but by mysterious presences; things chill and shapeless, silent and relentless, ever at my shoulder.

I kept a steady pace; sometimes in a kind of dream losing consciousness of all except the mechanical movement; sometimes abnormally alive and with every sense intensified; all the while, I am sure, a little light-headed.

At last the *Causse* began to hollow away before me and on either side. The dome of stars narrowed overhead, and the ground line rose, cup-like against it. Here the creeping mists drifted in places as high as my knees—an added misery, for, instinctively, in a half-witted way, I felt myself bound to wade as through waters. And I was vaguely glad when the way inclined upward again.

It was here that I met the only concrete terror of the night. An animal shape came out of the void spaces, at a curious swift lolloping gait. It looked

huge in the uncertain light. I made sure it was a wolf at last, and stopped short, searching with cold hands for my pistols. Before I could even draw them, the head of a dog, with open mouth, lolling tongue and staring eyes, was close to me. The creature sniffed the air, gave a not unfriendly bark, and cantered off loosely. I have thought since, that the familiar farmyard smell hanging about my borrowed cloak was what saved me from an unpleasant, possibly dangerous encounter.

Between the reaction from my fears and the relief of meeting with anything so akin to humanity as a shepherd's dog, my spirit received a fillip. I quickened my step and reached the higher ground again. Beneath me lay another hollow, and in it gleamed a faint reddish light round and about which I descried certain confused masses, dark against the pallid mists. The airs which, on this crest, moved somewhat more keenly brought with them the unmistakable smell of sheep. Yonder must be the night shelter of a shepherd in charge of his flock.

I halted and looked about me with a glance of returning sanity. The night scenery had changed. Instead of those vague stretches of nothingness, the ground was broken; sharp outcrops of rock started here and there; the turf underfoot was of stronger growth and, in some parts, shadowed by small bushy trees.

I bethought myself to look at my watch. The lamp in the lantern was out—probably had long been so; for when, with some difficulty in the faint moonlight, I made out the needles on the white face, I found it was past one o'clock. . . . Three hours' walk, Roubilliac had said!—It had not struck eight when I left Castel-Rozac—I had been tramping for more than five.

A singular result of this discovery was first to unveil to me the unbearable extent of my bodily fatigue, and then that of my misfortune. Clearly I had lost my way in the wilderness; clearly it was also useless—nay, impossible—to go farther. I came to a sudden resolution,

or, it would be more accurate to say, surrender. I would wrap myself in the cloak—how wise Roubilliac had been in forcing it upon me!—I would lie in the shelter of the nearest of those uprising rocks, and yield myself to sleep until returning day enabled me to take new bearings. Some vague idea of prudence made me reject the thought of going down into the hollow and demanding the hospitality of the shepherd's shelter—prudence, no doubt, but also an undefined disgust.

I woke only once, to see the moon, red-hued again, and immensely enlarged through the vapours, sinking so low that she seemed to rest her cheek upon the outer rim of the earth; to feel an intolerable sense of pain in all my limbs, and to tell myself that if I did not instantly rise I should certainly die. And the next instant I was asleep again.

I was lost in a dreadful dream, in which I thought myself gripped and torn by some monster which assumed the alternate identities of Bertrand the wolf and Brisco the hound. Then my tormentor underwent another change, the most fearful to my held senses. It was old man Giscourt who was strangling the life out of me! I could hear his bleating, evil laugh, and I woke to a reality at first hardly less terrifying.

I was indeed being grasped and shaken, if not by the throat, at least by the shoulder; and, bending over me, was a countenance so hairy and savage that my first bewildered instinct was to free myself and draw my pistols. The bleating that in my sleep had frozen my blood was still vibrating in the air.

Yet the eyes that were looking into mine were, I suddenly marked, the kindest, the most innocent, most child-like that I ever saw in man's face. And a voice, rough, yet at the same time indescribably gentle, was saying, in the *patois* of the country, giving me the thou of friendliness:

"Praise to the saints, companion, thou art alive!"

My shoulder was released. I felt a warm, comforting grip on my cold, stiff hand. I slowly sat up. The

world was sparkling in a pale-yellow radiance. Bleatings were all about, repeated, caught up, flung back; now near, now far; goats and sheep. And other sounds—a universal faint tinkling, as if every dew-drop had turned into a bell.

I burst into a foolish laugh, that was half a sob. It was such a kindly world to wake into, after all, from that dream of death and torment! And the thief whom I believed to be trying to strangle me was but a simple shepherd, with charity in his eyes. . . . And it had been the sheep, the guileless sheep, in their scores about the rocks, cropping the short wet grass under the eyes of their guardians, and calling to each other, who had evoked the image of the father of all the Giscourts—fresh from hell. And there, close to my face, was the honest head of the dog who had waylaid me. He had, I remember, a rough grey coat, patched with black like a badger. I do not know what was his breed, or if he was of any breed at all. But I still think he and his master were two of the most excellent creatures God ever made.

Between them they took me down to the shepherd's wattle shelter. It was agony in all joints to move; and I staggered so that the good fellow ended by half-carrying me. . . . I can still see, in my mind's eye, the dog running in front, making a way for me through the flock, and looking over his shoulder to make sure that his master was taking due care of me; then returning to his duty, to keep the silly bleating community within proper bounds!—That shepherd and his dog were the only genuine good Samaritans I ever met.

In the shelter, seated on a round stone, I was regaled with a strange meal—black bread and sour goat's cheese—and with as many pulls as I could from a flask of singular red wine, which, like the shepherd himself, was rough, yet comforting. My simple host offered further, as a sure relish, a raw onion and a lump of rock salt in a wooden bowl, and showed some concern at my refusal. In truth it had been with a painful effort, and for fear of complete collapse, that I had forced myself to eat at

all. But the wine, crude as it was, brought warmth into my frame. The shepherd watched me drink, and gave me a smile and an encouraging nod, when I placed the bottle back on the ground.

This good creature was clad as may have been his predecessors of all the centuries: shapeless coat of sheepskin on his back, wrappings of nondescript cloth bound round his legs with crossing thongs, hat of plaited rushes. His hair and beard were matted one into the other and bleached by sun and rain from their original blackness into a sort of russet. His skin was as dark from weathering as white man's skin can be. And, under a furrowed forehead and a thicket of eyebrows, the eyes that gazed on me were blue and mild. . . . There came to me a vague notion, that some of the Saviour's poor disciples, who left their nets and spade to follow Him, may have looked just as did this man.

When I found that he forebore asking a single question, and I was myself sufficiently restored to think of proceeding on my way, I got up, and demanded—with forlorn hope of success I must own—whether he could direct me to the farmstead of one widow Cazalet.

To my astonishment he exclaimed, his face lighting up in a smile that crinkled it into scores of good wrinkles:

"*La mère* Cazalet?—Yes, yes, *perdi!* Madame Cazalet!—Why, she is my *patronne.* A good *patronne* she is, *mère* Cazalet!"

In confirmation he gesticulated towards the flock; and I saw that each tangled back was branded with a tarry *C.* Forthwith he drew me out of the hollow up to the ridge, and pointed westward. There, not half a mile away, in a greening fold of the ground, I beheld the rounded brown crests of a grove of walnut trees—a veritable oasis in this desert land of the Causse—and in the midst a chimney stack from which a delicate plume of blue smoke was rising lazily against the pearl-grey sky.

My head was swimming distressedly. I felt inclined to let myself drop, like a bad-tempered child, and sulk, at the discovery of the tiresome trick that Fate had played on me. . . . Here was I, racked with pain in every limb of me; sick and giddy; mist-soaked to the very marrow; stiff, sore and sorry after a night on the cold hill-top—when ten minutes more of energy might have brought me up to my goal!

Either the doctor had monstrously misrepresented the distance, or I had—and that was a mere stroke of luck after all—worked round to the right direction through immeasurable strayings.

Later, a freak of memory brought back to me the fact that I had piloted my steps along the haze-shrouded ground, by the help of the moon. In my dazed condition, I had gone on, unconsciously, keeping her ever in the same bearing—at my right shoulder. And while, during those long mortal hours in the waste, she sailed her steady westward course, I must have described an immense half-circle. Be that as it may, the house which should have met my first gaze to the eastward, now rose in the west.

I gave up trying to understand. I shook my wild shepherd by the hand and offered him one of those enormous French white pieces, an *écu* of five francs, which he refused, with an almost frightened look. Then, with a leap of inspiration on which I still pride myself, I fished out a new-minted English half-guinea. And he took it as a child might take a bright new farthing, in gleeful admiration. I have since thought he must have looked upon the George and Dragon as a medal of piety—for I saw the poor savage kiss it and cross himself.

As I looked back for a farewell glance at him from the bottom of the next hollow, he was standing in the middle of his flock, cut out against a sky of honey gold, the most exquisite I have ever seen; and his shaggy figure, and the sheep's backs, and even the laughing head of the dog, were outlined as with rims of fire.

Through all these years that vision remains with me. Were I an artist, I never would rest till I had painted the scene and all it meant of humanity at its most innocent, and of Nature at her most wonderful hour.

CHAPTER XX

A VAGRANT AND HIS PAPERS

I SCARCE know how I reached the farm-house. I can remember very little of my arrival there; that last half-mile had taxed my strength beyond conception. All that remains is the confused picture of an immense raftered kitchen, a winking red fire at the end of it, and a gaunt, very ugly old woman who turned round silently, to stare at me as I hobbled in.

Happily I had the doctor's letter ready in my hand. I was just able to hold it out to her. She took it still without a word; and presently I heard her exclaim, in the patois of the land, "*Ce boun Mousu* Roubilliac!" Then I collapsed on a bench, leaned my face on the table, and fell in a semi-swoon, conscious only of the agony in my head. Those who know anything of the kind of headache to which a man who has suffered concussion is liable will sympathize.

Now there followed a time which seemed interminable, though in reality it measured but two days. I slept, and had endless terrible dreams; and woke to thirst and universal anguish; and dropped off again; shivered and burned; and tossed in the box-bed where I found myself confined. It was screened off the rest of the kitchen by red and white striped curtains—and I thought, at times, these red stripes were so many hot bars on my brain.

And I drank eagerly of some bitter herb-brew which made me think I was back under the care of Madame Rivarol. After which I would again fall asleep to wake presently drenched, in my coarse linen shirt, under the rough blankets, and find the mountain of goose-down

quilt, which I invariably kicked off in my lucid moments, piled up again suffocatingly over me.

The widow Cazalet was a rigid nurse. She was a rigid woman altogether. I had no more power to resist her bony hand than might the chicken that I saw pecking furtively in and out of the kitchen.

We had, as far as I remember, never exchanged a word. But she appeared to understand well enough what was the matter with her visitor. Indeed she pulled me through with unflinching mastery.

On the third day I awoke, cool, nearly free from pain, ravenous. That day she fed me with milk-and-potato soup and a hunch of grey bread. At supper-time she gave me a hot glass of a kind of local spirit—*eau-de-vie de marc*, she stated it to be. I have often wished to taste again that rough yet nutty flavour. . . . That night I slept like a child, and the next day I got up and dressed: a cured if chastened man.

The whole of the fourth day was spent in perfect quiet, almost solitude—either out in the sunshine, on the bench by the door-step, or in the wooden armchair before the glowing hearth.

Madame Cazalet's entertainment was purely material. As I have said, she was a woman of few words, almost of none. She would silently set a pitcher of brimming warm milk before me and slap half a yard of bread on the table—and only a faint relaxation at the corner of her eyes betrayed the satisfaction it gave her hospitable soul to see the extent of my appetite.

It was certainly a Spartan place, that farm-house lost in the wilderness of the Causse; yet there was plenty. Whether it was the zest of convalescence, I do not know; but I thought I had never tasted such bread, or realized the virtue that lurks in cheese-and-onion soup. It comes back to me, thinking of the bizarre but excellent old woman (who has gone to her reward a score of years or more ago) that the only time I saw her really smile was at supper, on the last night, when she dished me up an omelette with shreds of ham in it, of which I left not the smallest scrap.

She held up four toilworn fingers; and I understood that I had devoured four eggs!

I never knew what service Roubilliac had done her; but I could measure the extent of her obligation to him by her scrupulous behaviour to me in the matter of money. The French peasant soul is thrifty—thrifty to positive greed. When, however, on the morning of my departure, I placed a banknote upon the table, she counted back such an elaborate and copious change that I am certain she had calculated to the smallest net fraction what my visit had cost her, fearful lest she should take a single farthing over.

With a five days' growth of dark beard—as I saw myself in the greenish, undulating mirror that hung near the window at the living end of the kitchen—I was a revolting spectacle. But there was no help for it—my knapsack was unprovided with shaving gear—and there was no man about the place likely to assist me with any.

I went forth on my tramp again, in a curious mood—much comforted as to the flesh, and with a quietude of mind I had not known since that day I had opened my eyes, up on the bluff, to find those of Adrienne de Ruffeleu fixed upon me.

The wearing experience of my night's wandering, and the short but sharp illness in the best box-bed of Madame Cazalet's kitchen, seemed to have drawn a dividing line between me and that month of passionate experience—I told myself that the curtain had dropped finally on the drama, and "*Charles, his friend*" had stepped down from the stage.

It was a still, kindly day. The country grew less bleak, more diversified, as I advanced north-westward, leaving behind me the wastes of the downs. I had lost all sense of being hunted. There was indeed little likelihood of any of the Louvetier band tracking me now. And, in any case, remembering the appearance I presented, I flattered myself that Charles de Quercy was unrecognizable.

Towards noon, I struck a small river that had cut a deep way with the strength of highland waters. I knew

that, by skirting it on its downward course, I must reach Sazerac—my goal for the day, according to Roubilliac's directions.

Sazerac stands on the shoulder of one of the outer spurs of the Causse. Like all the townships in that district, it has its ancient castle and its narrow spired church. At first sight of it in the distance, I mended my slackening pace. "Here," said I to myself, "here I will do three good things. First, and foremost, I will be shaved; for, between castle and church, there will surely dwell a barber. Then I will have a real dinner at the best inn. And I will sleep between white sheets, and, please the Lord, in a private room."

Now, perhaps, if I had not given way to that cat-like instinct for personal neatness; if I had not straightway sought out the barber's shop, and had been contented with eating my meal like a peasant, in a wine-house, I might have escaped one of the most exasperating episodes of my French journey.—It was, however, fraught with results in which I may well see a set design of Providence.

I entered the quaint winding cobbled main street of Sazerac with cheerfulness. It has sometimes seemed to me as if a man had more than one soul. While I was very well aware, then, that my real soul was only lulled from its pain, there was, I remember, a kind of little pagan, jovial spirit within me, awake and singularly alert to material enjoyment.

It was not long before I espied the bright copper shaving dish which in France is the sign of a barber's shop, dangling in the sun at the end of its parti-coloured pole. I made straight for the little booth—it was nothing better.

There was some delay, for it was past the normal hours of the *barbier's* functions. I was first interviewed by a slut of a girl with eyes like sloes, who curtly informed me that her father was not in; then, on my insisting that my requirements must be attended to, by a matron whose disastrous contours testified to an antipathy for constraint, and who informed me that her

man, having had his dinner, had gone on for his usual *demi-tasse* at the *Café du Beau Sabreur*. The lady surveyed me up and down, with most curious eyes, and addressed me with good-humoured contemptuous familiarity. She suggested that I might return about four o'clock, on the chance of the *patron* being back, though, she added with a shrug of fat shoulders, much would depend upon how many "little glasses" he had consumed. But on the whole she would recommend next morning as more advisable for the interview.

Here I committed the second breach of those wise instructions of Roubilliac's concerning the exhibition of a too wealthy appearance during the tramping stage of my travel. The giving of gold to a wild herd on the Causse was probably the more foolish of the two; but this one promptly led me into trouble.

I threw off my peasant cloak, thereby revealing my clothes of English cut; drew from my pocket a broad silver piece—that very *écu de cinq francs* which my good Samaritan had declined—planked it down upon the counter, and said, in the tone of a man accustomed to be promptly served:

"Pray, my worthy woman, you will do me the favour to fetch your man from his café whilst his hand is still steady. He will be paid for his trouble."

She snatched the piece and was off with a swiftness surprising in one of her avoirdupois.

"Here," said I complacently, settling myself forthwith into the wooden armchair, "is the most expensive shave I have had or probably shall ever have in my life. But it is worth it." Fatuous young epicure that I was!

It had been rather a misty morning; but now, as if to fit my humour, the sun broke out between the clouds and lit up the little grey town to a vivid picturesqueness. It was but an hour after noon, when no doubt all Sazerac was ruminating over the comfortable midday meal. . . . No doubt also the tables at the *Café du Beau Sabreur* were crowded. . . . This Sazerac seemed an easy, prosperous place, in a humble way. There was the

usual good smell of roast coffee, wood-smoke, and bread-making about the air. . . . Somewhere, rose the shouts of playing children. And a girl's voice—probably that of the sloe-eyed slut—was suddenly uplifted in a snatch of song from the regions behind the shop.

It was scarcely a shop, as I have said; rather a kind of half-open booth, with a square window, unglazed, its wooden shutters flung back, close to where the operating armchair was placed for the sake of the better light. In fact, as usual in that part of the world, the barber's saloon was freely open to the public gaze.

As I waited—without too much impatience, for I appreciated the rest from my morning's march—there came down the deserted street a slow, rhythmic, slightly jingling sound of steps suggestive of jack-boot and spur. And presently a broad, white-braided cocked hat appeared in my line of vision, surmounting the martially severe countenance of a *gendarme*. He wore the heavy, grizzled moustache of a veteran, in spite of the new-fangled royal uniform which, for correctness, would have demanded a clean upper-lip.

This functionary halted for a second or two, cast his professionally searching eye into the shop and over me—then resumed the stately rhythm of his round.

Hardly had the last of his clanking footsteps died away, when the barber made his appearance, driven by his spouse. It was perceptible that he had already had more than one "little glass"—not enough, however, I judged, to render him dangerous.

The barber of Sazerac, like most of his trade, was a loquacious person. I was grateful to his consort for bustling him on, first with the towels, then with the lather. There are few positions in life when a man feels more helpless than when, wound in cocoon-like wrappings, he lies in a barber's chair; but my situation was rendered still more so by the fact that the Sazerac Figaro drenched me in suds to the very eyes, then proceeded to hold me firmly by the nose while he flourished his instrument.

A townsman, he spoke better French than my bucolic friends of the Causse; but the strong accent of

Guyenne made his conversation difficult to follow. He plied me with questions, even while there was no possibility of obtaining a response.

"Monsieur has come from far? It is easy to see that monsieur is not of the country. My faith, if I might venture on a supposition, monsieur is travelling incognito. Monsieur has probably his own reasons. Oh, not that monsieur need fear any indiscretion: a barber never talks! Never. The chair of the barber, sir, is like the confessional. From what direction may monsieur be coming? It is his intention, no doubt, to sojourn some time in Sazerac? Monsieur was indeed in need of the barber! When my wife runs in, at the café, and calls to me: 'Quick, quick, Théodore, there is a rich *gentilhomme*, disguised, who wants to be shaved immediately, immediately, do you hear?' and then shows me the big white piece, I can assure monsieur, people were quite interested! We do not see as many strangers at Sazerac as we would like.—Ah, a thousand pardons! a little incision I fear. Bah! it is nothing. In truth monsieur's beard was devilishly long. One moment: a little tuft of cotton-wool."

As Théodore fussily ministered to my bleeding chin, the sound of the booted, jingling tread, quicker this time, became again audible. A moment later the door of the shop was blocked by a burly figure, yellow-breeched, blue-coated, white-braided. It was my friend of the searching eye.

The representative of public safety walked into the shop without more salutation than a nod at the barber; took up a straw-bottomed chair; sat down a-straddle, and, folding his arms upon the back, fixed me with a steady stare.

The suspicious scrutiny of the gaze was qualified by a conventionally friendly smile. On his entrance the barber had given signs of a certain trepidation and fallen into abrupt silence.

The gendarme—or rather, brigadier, to judge by the stripes on his sleeve—waved a broad gauntletted hand:

"Finish your job, my lad. Finish your job. Then I shall do myself the pleasure of having a little talk with your client."

I had some experience, as I have set down already, of the inquisitorial ways of the French police with travellers. And if Roubilliac had not assured me that quite the last thing the Giscourts would ever do would be to invoke the interference of the law, I might have had some qualms. But, as matters stood, I lay back in perfect tranquillity and unconcernedly returned the stare.

When the job, as the brigadier had called it, was finished—and it was not without further gashes, for the barber was discomposed by the proximity of the white galooned hat—the gendarme dragged his chair a little nearer.

Then began the inevitable inquisition—about my comings and goings; my intentions and my business in life. Though it was delivered in would-be pleasant, bantering tone, it none the less betrayed a mistrust and an underlying threat that was particularly obnoxious to my free-born Briton's humour.

Strong in the sense of my immunities, I took a certain malicious pleasure in baffling my interrogator. I returned his banter with superciliousness, his insinuating questions with wilfully puzzling statements. The man's colour began to deepen. His tone grew acid. He got up, pointedly looked me up and down from my English boots to my silk cravat, then lifted a corner of my peasant frieze-coat; and, with the tone of a man making a truly damning discovery, stated menacingly that my talk was all flim-flams (the French equivalent is *de la frime*), and that in short I was not what I pretended to be.

"My good man," I said, getting up in my turn, "I have already told you that I am an English gentleman, travelling on foot, for pleasure and research. As regards that cloak and hat, which seem to capsize your reasoning powers, they were adopted on the advice of a countryman of your own, who deemed that my personal safety

would be greater under them, along your roads and byways, than in the usual attire of my condition. Therefore——"

"All well and good, sir," he interrupted roughly. "We'll inquire into that. Meanwhile, suppose we just have a look at your papers—*hein?*"

It struck me that, in spite of his termagant tone, he was not a little apprehensive lest my unusual tale should after all prove supported. It had amused me to play him for a while; but my appetite was now diminished, and I was glad to have done with the business—especially as a small crowd had by this time gathered in front of the shop, and was following the interview with hilarious interest.

I drew from my inner pocket the envelope containing all my credentials—irrefutable documents—and handed it to him with an ironic flourish.

I was proceeding, in the airiest manner, to buckle on my knapsack again, when a deep exclamation from the gendarme arrested me.

"*Hola*, young man—what sort of farce is this?"

Anger, not unmixed with exultation, was blazing from his whole huge person. He shook the papers at me; tossed them upon the counter; folded his arms, and glared at me from under threateningly drawn brows. And before I could overcome my astonishment, be began a harangue that was addressed less to me than to the rapidly increasing audience gathered outside the shop. As he spoke he slowly, dramatically, advanced on me:

"Ahà! so you thought you could brazen it out, my *gaillard!* You take me for a greenhorn. But, no, my friend, you have to deal with Mathieu Perrin, brigadier these twelve years. I had my eye on you from the first, clever as you may think yourself. From the first glance I said to myself: '*Tiens!* Seems devilishly like our bird. Just the cut of him, by description received. Twenty-four. Black eyes. Dark, handsome. Look at him. Dark? Man of audacity. Plenty of nerve, *perdi;* only hear him talk! Speaks with an accent.' The travelling Englishman tale is well found, young man.

You do it well. Oh yes, it's not badly done, all round. But when one knows what to look for——"

"But," I cried at last—I was suddenly as red-angry as Montbars himself might have been, for I had had to retreat before the bullying advance right against the wall—"in the name of all the devils, what fault have you to find with my papers? Is it a crime in France to have dark hair and black eyes, and an English accent? What sort of fit has overtaken you? These papers," I cried scornfully, "have passed your betters, my friend."

The brigadier, whom my arrogant attitude had whipped into a frenzy of rage peculiarly Gallic, now unfolded his arms, and spread my papers out on the counter—spluttering the while:

"You'll make a mock of me, will you, my cock? You'll make a mock of the law? I'll soon show you what it means to make a mock of the law. And with papers like that!"

He slapped his broad palm upon them. I brushed him aside and bent down to look; rubbed my eyes and looked again. I heard the fellow laugh, and titters ripple among the crowd outside. Instead of the noble parchment with its copperplate writing, its heraldic devices and embossed seals, here was a blank double sheet of foolscap. I turned it over; took it up and shook it. And there fell out a small folded note.

The gendarme put out a hand, which, quite unconscious of the enormity, I roughly put on one side. I must suppose that there was something in the concentration of my air which imposed upon him, for he allowed me to pick the sheet up, and walk with it to the window.

This is what I read:

"Once more, thank you, my excellent good dog!"

The only signature was the sketch of a wolf's head, clearly indicated by a few strokes. I stood transfixed. A complete silence had fallen upon the scene. After a pause:

"It is my duty, sir," said the gendarme, who from

that moment assumed a more dignified manner, "it is my duty to insist upon seeing that letter."

"Make what you like of it," I cried, and tossed it to him, with a little laugh.

There comes a moment when there is nothing left to a man who finds himself the sport of ironic fate but to turn and mock himself. . . . So, that was to be the farewell note! I was not even "*Charles, his friend*," the useful, unobtrusive confidant of the drama! I was the fool of the comedy, whom every one buffets and every one steps over; whom the merry-minded think it humorous to hit on the raw!

The gendarme read; shook his head, and read again —and of course made nothing of it. He came close to me:

"Your affair, young man," he said, "is not clear. What is not clear must be looked into. I have my duty."

He then pronounced the sacramental phrase of the French executive—touching me, lightly enough, I must admit, on the shoulder:

"In the name of the law, I arrest you."

I became a model captive in the hands of that gendarme. A strange dullness had fallen upon my soul—a sentimental humiliation, so complete, so numbing, that it seemed to me as if nothing in the outside world could have any importance, or even the faintest interest. He did not know what to make of me. Any-one so submissive and at the same time so indifferent he had, I am sure, never dealt with.

I can remember now—though I do not believe I noticed then—that he became almost gracious to me, in a kind of high judicial way. He informed me that he would at once escort me to Rodez—there to be examined by the *préfet* of the *département*, who was the proper person to look into my case; and that, as it was a goodish way, a carriole would be provided to convey us thither. I acquiesced to everything in the utmost detachment.

Shoulder to shoulder with my captor, but without

any indignity of personal restraint, I was marched as far as the local *gendarmerie*. And there, while the vehicle was requisitioned and got ready, the brigadier sat down to a literary composition which I surmised to be a report of the circumstances of my arrest.

A distinctly unsympathetic crowd had escorted us, and now waited in front of the guard-room door, engaged in excited discussion of the probable nature of my crimes. In ordinary circumstances, I should have felt deeply the odiousness of being the centre of that kind of attention ; but I did not care. I really believe that, in the ruffled and disgusted state of my soul, I would not have cared if I had been taken out and shot then and there !

This acrid mood of self-detachment was not softened, when a little later, I found myself sitting on the back-breaking bench of the carriole, with the law's minion by my side, as we jogged and jolted along the interminable way to Rodez.

But as the misty evening began to thicken about us, after a blood-red sunset, oddly enough a reaction set in. My spirit reasserted itself. . . . "Excellent good dog" that I was !—the soreness of my heart could not turn to anger against my mistress ; nor even to any extent against Montbars, now escorting her through France as Mr. Charles de Quercy, crossing the border, or taking ship to England, under the ægis of my lord Castlereagh's signature ; but it took the shape of a sudden aggressiveness towards my captor. He had grown a little somnolent, during the long spell of my sullen mutism ; and the horn of his cocked hat had several times collided with my head—once indeed with my very eye.

"Do not imagine," I cried—without any preamble, following only my own irritable thoughts, "do not imagine that you have done a clever thing in interfering with me ! All you have done is to make a consummate ass of yourself—as indeed you may learn soon, for I suppose that is Rodez, yonder on the hill ?"

He stared at me with a prawn-like eye, justly surprised. My changes of mood were certainly rather abrupt.

"Yes, that is the town," he growled. "As to the ass, when——"

"You stand warned, my friend," I cut in. "I would be careful, if I were you, about that report to the *préfet*, or whoever it is you are taking me to. I would not be too cocksure, you know!"

I think my tone impressed him again, in spite of himself. It was, however, with huffy decision that he answered:

"My report is made. It will have to go in. You'll give your explanation—if you have one."

After this he relapsed into dignified silence and sat up with correct military stiffness, his sabre between his knees, hands crossed on the hilt, for the rest of the journey.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MANTLE OF MONTBARS

I WAS very cold, very weary, more bored than words can express, but still very angry, as we began the ascent of one of the narrow dark old streets of Rodez. Night had fallen. In provincial towns very few people are abroad after dark; we attracted, and I was glad of it, little or no attention. At last the *carriole* stopped at the corner of a small secluded square before an ancient house, of noble if rather dilapidated appearance. It had a carved-stone front, and balconies of handsome curveting iron-work. I doubt, even if I had known that this was the celebrated mansion of the Armagnacs, that it would have evoked any interest in me then. I was in no mood to admire anything. A sentry by the door, resting his arm in a depressed attitude upon the bend of his fixed bayonet, and a broad escutcheon displaying the royal fleur-de-lys recently restored to France, proclaimed the place to be some official residence.

My gendarme got down and ordered me to do the same. And presently when, in answer to a tug at the bell, the great armoured door was thrown open, he handed in a broad envelope, saying with military briefness:

"For M. le Préfet. From Sazerac."

The servant received the paper.

"Urgent?" he asked.

"Urgent," said the gendarme.

"Very good. Come in, brigadier."

We entered; the door was closed behind us, and we were left in a close, gloomy ante-room for an interminable

quarter of an hour. Without thinking it necessary to request permission, I divested myself of cloak, hat, and knapsack, which I threw down in a corner.

I have said that I was still, above all things, angry. The feeling is undoubtedly one of the best stimulants to energy and initiative. It stood me in good stead that evening. Under its influence, when we were at last summoned upstairs to the magnate's presence, I cut in with so trenchant, so to say authoritative, a manner, that I secured at the outset the precious advantage of stating my own case,—assuming, in fact, the position of plaintiff instead of delinquent.

The prefect, a small, rotund man, of good-looking if rather vapid appearance, was seated in an armchair by the hearth of his private room, toasting his silk-stocking-ed legs before a comfortable fire. At his elbow was a small rococo table, upon which stood a pair of silver candlesticks. He had evidently just finished perusing the report; for, as we entered, he handed it negligently to a man who was doubtless his secretary—then turned half-round to look at us.

At first sight of him I had an intuition that seemed almost inspired, so correct it proved to be, of the kind of man with whom I had now to deal. Here was one of the new Government's functionaries; "more royalist than the king," as the phrase went then; an ardent adherent of *ancien régime* habits and manners; a devotee of its elegancies, its ceremoniousness, its ethics. . . . One to whom the word *gentilhomme* was a word to conjure with. . . . I was then, even as I am now, a man of manners naturally modest and simple. But I assumed a tone on which I look back with amazement.

The gendarme saluted smartly, waiting to be questioned. I coolly passed in front of him.

"Monsieur le Gouverneur, I presume?" said I, making a bow of nicely calculated courtesy and using not the modern word, *préfet*, but the aristocratic, pre-Revolution title of his office, with which my conversations with the old Comte had happily made me acquainted—"Monsieur le Gouverneur, I am rejoiced

that circumstances should have brought me so soon in contact with you! I am, sir, a gentleman from England. For the last month or so I have been the guest of a distinguished seigneur of this country, Monsieur le Comte de Ruffeleu de Castel-Rozac. Doubtless you know him?"

The little man had, almost from my first word, risen from his chair. By this time he had made three bows —the last, in its respectful profundity, obviously dedicated to the noble name I mentioned.

"I am, Monsieur le Gouverneur," I went on, my tones, if anything, warming in indignation, "the victim of a gross error of zeal on the part of this officer." I pointed to the stolid gendarme behind me. "It is true that I have had a misfortune with my papers. A childish trick seems to have been played upon me, of which I was until this morning unaware. The official documents have been abstracted from my case, and blank paper substituted. A pleasantry——"

"One moment, sir." The *préfet* raised his hand with a graceful but commanding gesture towards the secretary, who had discreetly retired behind his writing-table.

"Durand, advance a chair for this gentleman. Allow me, sir, to beg you to be seated.—A pleasantry?"

So saying, he sank back into his armchair, and looked quite engagingly at me.

"A pleasantry," I repeated, "in singular taste, I must admit. You doubtless know, sir, Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu-Fézensac, a cousin of my valued friend the Comte de Ruffeleu—the whole country is certainly aware that she is a young lady of high spirits which occasionally lead her beyond the bounds of discretion."

The *préfet* gave a little non-committal smile.

"I have heard," he said, "Mademoiselle de Fézensac mentioned as a young lady, as you say, of high spirits."

Here I wheeled round sharply upon my gendarme, with the air of a prince of the blood.

"Tell M. le Gouverneur," I commanded him, "what you found written on the billet which was folded up in

the blank sheets—that billet which I permitted you to read."

The man hesitated; and I sharply repeated the order, seconded this time, and not without some acerbity, by the *préfet*. Then the bewildered brigadier blurted out:

"*Merci encore une fois, mon bon, mon excellent chien!*"

The *préfet* laughed delicately. I proceeded, following up my advantage:

"Tell M. le Gouverneur whether I was not perfectly prepared to exhibit my papers; and whether my amazement was not even greater than your own when I discovered the substitution. Tell his Excellency"—I risked this old style, and not, I could see, without good effect—"if I did not laugh when I read those words, to you so inexplicable, to me the key of the whole affair. Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu," I went on, turning back to the *préfet*, "had a playful way of calling me her good dog, because—well, if I may say so of myself, because of my amiable disposition. And now, M. le Gouverneur, permit me to ask you if an English gentleman enjoying the hospitality of this country; a man, I may claim, of position and of race in my own—Charles de Quercy, sir, your servant—vouched for by his Government, by yours; an honoured guest in one of your noblest houses, should have been treated like a criminal, when it was obvious to the meanest intellect that he was the victim of an absurd practical joke."

"Saving your respect, M. le Préfet," cried the gendarme in a protesting bellow, as the magnate, who had nodded his head appreciatingly to my remarks, glared ominously at him, "have you examined the prisoner's appearance and compared it with the description of the accused named Montbars, issued to the brigades of gendarmerie a few days ago? A young man, M. le Préfet. Black, M. le Préfet. Complexion dark—eyes black—height above medium, M. le Préfet. Accent unusual. Character audacious. Audacious, M. le Préfet!"

The little *préfet* had gradually become less smiling. He now was grave. He made round eyes at me. I saw that there was a swing of the pendulum.

I plunged again into eloquence. It seemed indeed as if the mantle of the "audacious" Montbars had fallen upon me.

A sense of injury and a consciousness of integrity combined are a fine standby to a man in peril. And if to these is added the recklessness of the lover contemned, you will have the explanation of the unwonted *animus* that possessed me that evening. It led me out of my own character—on the whole rather good—into one of quite convincing haughtiness. It gifted me with a flow of language at once defiant and persuasive.

"How?" cried I, with a laugh. "Did I hear the name of Montbars? Do you indeed take me for M. Fabien Montbars? I ought to be flattered, upon my word!—Yes, M. le Gouverneur," I went on, forestalling the question I saw rising to his lips—"I have an acquaintance—if but a slight one—with this gentleman. A most interesting, a most entertaining personality, I thought. We met out hunting, at Langévol. A curious hunt it was, too. But I must not waste your time. Ah, ah, all explains itself.—I have heard that this M. Montbars is wanted—for some political crime, I understood. I could feel it in my heart, *mon brave*"—here I gave the wearer of the yellow breeches and white galloons a smile which plainly disconcerted him more than had my anger—"to be sorry for your disappointment!"

I got up and came closer to the *préfet*.

"May I trouble you, M. le Gouverneur, to look at this watch? These are my family arms—the arms of de Quercy. And, inside the pan, you will perceive the inscription: *To Charles Orlando de Quercy, on his twenty-first birthday, from Orlando Arbuthnot, D.D.* Arbuthnot is an English name of some note. That of my mother's family. Difficult to pronounce, I will admit. If you will further examine the two seals attached to the chronometer, you will find one engraved with the same arms, and another with a different coat—the cognizance of Arbuthnot."

"But surely, sir," I went on, as after inspecting them

he returned the trinkets in a puzzled silence, "it is enough for me to say that my Embassy in Paris will vouch for me; to say that I am the friend of M. de Ruffeleu. In fine, my good sir," I gave him a smile of a very different quality from the withering show of teeth with which I had favoured the discomfited gendarme, "I have a hundred proofs for you that I am myself, and not another person."

The pendulum was swinging in my favour again. I saw it. The brigadier saw it too; and with it the fading of the distinction he had reckoned upon. Sullenly he growled:

"The gentleman has not explained why he was in disguise. Nor why he was tramping the country, pack-a-back, behaving in every way like one trying to escape."

The *préfet's* eye sought my countenance with all the vexation of renewed doubts. I remembered, as in a flash, Montbars' description of the "Milord Anglais," and, finding it apposite to my case, said in my most genial tones:

"Sir, we English are, as you know, an eccentric generation. I am, among other things, a student of antiquities. I had set my heart on exploring your interesting country on foot. But I was warned, sir, that, in spite of the happy Restoration, your roads and your woods are still far from secure for a wealthy-looking traveller. I little expected, however, to find that the dangers besetting my movements would arise from the over-zealousness of your police. The cloak and hat, to which I understand this man means to allude, are but garments that were lent me for my tramp over your Causses. My luggage"—I waved my hand—"awaits me, or so I trust, at the *Hôtel de la Sirène*, in this very town."

The *préfet's* countenance became illumined:

"Here," he cried, and his relief was unmistakable, "is something at last we can substantiate.—Brigadier, you will immediately proceed to the *Sirène;* demand this luggage and have it brought here."

"Certainly," said I, cheered by the prospect of fresh

linen. "If M. le Gouverneur will provide me with paper and pen, I will empower you to receive my property."

This little stroke of impertinence on the part of a prisoner sealed my innocence in the eyes of the great man.

As the gendarme took my letter, I threw a banknote across the table after him.

"You will be good enough to pay the hotel keeper in my name—M. Charles de Quercy."

The door closed between the most depressed of brigadiers in France, and the most thrilled, the most expectant of *préfets*. This latter now rose, scribbled a few lines himself at the table.

"Durand," he said, handing him the sheet, "you will take this at once to the officer in charge of the guard. And you will, at the same time, order that the blue chamber be made ready at once for the accommodation of this gentleman."

As soon as we were alone, the little man made me another of his old-world bows:

"Sir," he said, rubbing his plump hands together, "*de jure*, in the execution of my duty, I must consider you still as a prisoner. *De facto*, you will be, if you so far favour me, my guest. You will not, I trust, deny me the pleasure of your company at my evening meal. I may venture to say that you will be at least as well entertained in this house as at the *Hôtel de la Sirène*."

My gaoler-host was a bachelor. But, as I was able to see at the first glance I cast about the chamber into which he brought me, and later on during our *tête-à-tête* meal, a man of elegant tastes, who knew how "to make himself served." He provided for my necessities with as hospitable an anxiety as if I had actually been his honoured visitor. But, true to his dual character, he had not neglected to establish a sentry outside my room!

I caught a glimpse of this worthy, through the doorway, when presently, to my great satisfaction, the portmanteau arrived from the hotel. Soon after, the *préfet* put in his appearance, followed by his secretary and the

brigadier himself, to witness, as I was told, officially and regularly, the unfolding of this piece of evidence.

M. de la Boulaye—the name, as I subsequently found out, of the hospitable *préfet*—handed me a letter, which, he informed me, with a solemnity intended to cover if possible the odiousness of the action, he had considered it his duty personally to *perlustrer*. (Perlustrer, in ordinary language, consists, as I have found, in officially taking cognizance of a suspect's private correspondence.)

It was from the excellent Roubilliac, who had scribbled a few lines on the sheet in which the key was wrapped.

The note was addressed to—

M. CHARLES DE QUERCY,
to be called for at the
HÔTEL DE LA SIRÈNE,
in RODEZ.

and it ran as follows :—

"CASTEL-ROZAC.
"Tuesday.

"Herewith, Sir and dear young friend, is the key of your portmanteau. *Peste*, but you have an elegant wardrobe for a young man on a pedestrian tour! By the way, you can leave, if you have no further use for it, certain habiliments of lesser smartness in the care of the Hotel Keeper.

"M. le Comte, you will be gratified to hear, is much better. Pray believe me always in the readiness to serve you, of your devoted

"NICOLAS ROUBILLIAC."

There was a postscript :

"Louradour has a fine tale of rumours concerning police discoveries in Langévol—coining, nothing less! It seems a big affair. That Vidocq! he will at least have a consolation prize, after the flight of his bird."

Now, I should have thought that this letter, coupled with the appearance of my baggage, each article of which M. de la Boulaye examined with judicial minuteness and also, I could notice, with the critical curiosity of one who still claimed to be *un élégant* himself—might have established my identity in the eyes of the most suspicious. No word of acquittal, however, dropped from his lips. He pronounced himself neither one way nor the other; but, after inviting me blandly to hasten in my preparations for supper, bowed himself out of the room, drawing his satellites after him. The sentry was still on guard as I emerged, and indeed escorted me closely to the door of the dining-room.

Moving through that dark old house, so dismal amid the faded relics of past grandeurs, I felt like a very butterfly of fashion. But I certainly created an impression on "his Excellency." He even looked at me with a certain wistfulness. And it was with an increased display of hospitable courtesy that he did the honours of his table.

My host's conversation, during the meal, swung between the discussion of dishes—for he was a *gourmet*—and the trend of present fashions, as instanced by such examples as my stock, my engraved buttons; the length of my waistcoat, and the new-shaped cut of my *revers*. My legs were under the table; but I knew that certain close-fitting kerseymeres had caught his admiring gaze; for I had seen his glance go from them to his own rather heavy silk-stockinged calves, the moment I had entered the room.

All the while I was grilling to hear him pronounce me at liberty. The sound of the sentry's slow tramp outside the dining-room door had begun to cause me exasperating sensations in the spinal column. I waited, however, until the mellowing moments of dessert and of "wine for wine's sake," then plunged boldly.

"M. le Gouverneur," said I, "surely you will now admit that I have proved myself to be what I state I am. Your hospitality, sir, is truly delightful," I proceeded warmly, "but I confess I should enjoy it more

did I not hear the footsteps of that brave soldier outside."

M. de la Boulaye looked at me, smiled in a rather embarrassed fashion, and cleared his throat:

"Sir," he said then, "every public functionary finds himself, from time to time, in the painful position of having to disregard his own intimate convictions, and consider only the official aspect of the situation. I have the pleasure of assuring you that, personally, I do not doubt any of your statements; that you seem to me a young gentleman of equally high breeding and character. Nevertheless as a magistrate, as a servant of the King, I am forced to consider the possibility of your being the exceptionally clever adventurer who is wanted by His Majesty's Government."

Then—no doubt in answer to the look of annoyance, which I felt darkening my face—he resumed, tapping his breast with a jewelled finger:

"I am equally quite ready, personally, to believe that it is the purest coincidence that your *signalement* should tally closely with that of M. Montbars. I am also prepared to consider that your well-known national eccentricity may account for the singular—you must admit, my dear sir, they were singular—circumstances in which you were arrested by the brigadier of Sazerac; that the absence of all "papers" is due to a practical joke played upon you—a very malicious joke, it must be granted. On the other hand, with all my good will toward you, I cannot conceal it from myself, that evidence lies against you; and that, as it appears to be well known that M. Montbars has been brought up out of France, it might be quite in keeping with what is reported of his clever personality that he should have provided himself with a charming alias, perfect at all points."

By this time I had grown again so angry that it was all I could do to remain civil:

"What then, in the name of Heaven," cried I, "am I to understand, M. le Préfet? I have offered you the word of my Ambassador in Paris. Surely he ought to suffice!"

"In Paris, M. de Quercy—you see I do not hesitate to call you thus, in our private intercourse"—he answered soothingly, "but we need hardly keep you under escort as far as Paris. There is a shorter and simpler way of obtaining the necessary testimony, the complete vindication that is required. I shall be quite satisfied if M. le Comte de Ruffeleu, your friend, vouches for you."

I looked at him blankly, for the moment not understanding his purpose. He gave me a self-conscious smile:

"I have had the pleasure of meeting the Comte de Ruffeleu," he said. "It was at the last *Te Deum* here, in celebration of the happy return of our King. I had indeed the privilege of a conversation with him at the repast in the Episcopal palace afterwards. We were on either side of His Grandeur. I shall be able to accompany you to Castel-Rozac. It will give me great pleasure to recall myself to M. de Ruffeleu's memory, while at the same time accomplishing my duty, and—not the least of my considerations, believe me, rendering you a very good service."

"It is impossible!" I replied, roughly. The thought of returning to Castel-Rozac was unendurable. It meant the reopening of all my wounds, the stirring afresh of all my bitterness, the stultifying, moreover, of all Roubilliac's precautions. "The Count is ill, sir."

"The Count is better," responded the *préfet*, "if we are to credit that letter."

The blandness of his voice had faded. I saw the flicker of doubt reappear in his eye; and realized that I was taking a wrong turn. His next words confirmed the impression.

"As I have just said"—M. de la Boulaye's tone was dry—"the suggestion is made entirely in your interest. Should you prefer to be forwarded under escort to Paris"—he paused expressively. "Only, you understand, the matter passes then definitely out of my hands. And, of course——"

"By no means!" I interrupted. "Certainly let it be Castel-Rozac, since you consider it necessary."

In truth I was beginning to feel an ever keener desire to get out of the ridiculous situation into which Louvecelle's ingenious trick had led me. I had a shrewd conviction that once the French police had hold of me, I would not escape from their clutches without serious trouble. The British Embassy could certainly ill protect one whose cries might never reach it; M. de la Boulaye's last remark conveyed a distinctly unpleasant hint.

"Let it be Castel-Rozac," I repeated. "And as soon as possible, sir. My only objection was the illness of my kind host and friend. He may not be able to see you."

"Perhaps not," said the *préfet*. He was still, I could see, hovering in suspicion. "But did you not mention a young lady, Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu-Fézensac?"

"True," said I.

I tried to express a cheerful acquiescence. I could scarce say: "Sir, she of whom you speak has eloped with the very criminal you are after!" There was nothing for it but to put the best face possible on the matter; to trust to luck; to the testimony of Roubilliac, of Louradour, and the servants—and take the risk of the *louvetiers*' vengeance!

Thus it was decided.

I went to bed that night, between white sheets, as I had hoped, and in the comfort and decencies of a private room; but still a prisoner, to the sound of the sentry's heavy tread and cough.

CHAPTER XXII

THE RETURN OF THE HEIR

If I had hated the thought of going back to Castel-Rozac, over M. de la Boulaye's pears and claret, I hated it still more the next morning over my solitary coffee and roll, in the dark wainscoted bedroom of the *préfecture*. But the sound of that sentry's pacing in the passage, his abominable hoarse cough, if it had kept me awake most of the night in a fever of exasperation, was a salutary reminder that of two evils it is wise to choose the lesser.

We were an odd company as we set forth from the ancient mansion of the Armagnacs. There was M. le Préfet, in the very handsomest black suit with cut-steel buttons, ruffles at his breast and wrists, silk stockings and silver-buckled shoes; his face framed by those taking waves of hair once known as *ailes-de-pigeons;* and his pre-Revolution sentiments further emphasized by a delicate frosting of powder in his hair. Anything more decisively, elegantly, *royaliste* could not be devised.

I myself was attired in that many-caped *surtout* which had awakened Roubilliac's animadversion. M. de la Boulaye eyed it rather enviously. And, when I donned the sable cap, the lining of which matched the crimson silk scarf about my throat, I could read him like a book and see that while I was given an enhanced position in his esteem, he was the better pleased at the thought of visiting Castel-Rozac in such decidedly modish company.

At the door, as the sentry presented arms, he

motioned me urbanely into the carriage, then he himself took place beside me. We started off with most admired clatter, a mounted gendarme on either side as escort, down the steep streets and so on to the Millac road. I smothered a curse upon the whole excursion. The prefect was smiling. Seldom, I believe, in his dreary provincial hole, had he found himself in such congenial circumstances.

In every country and class there have been and always will be individuals whose happiness depends upon the affability of their social superiors. Harmless souls, for the most part, like my amiable gaoler, who, while the rest of the world strives and agonizes for passion, love or hate, for power or progress, will find their height of joy and their depth of sorrow in the smile or the indifference of the well-born.

It was a dreary, drizzling day. A fog reigned supreme, blotting out both the wide plains and the bold outlines of the distant hills. We went at a round pace; for the prefectorial horses were as fine a pair as I ever saw in France, and the escort was mounted on animals of that sturdy Tarbes breed the quality of which is a byword. We made a tremendous clatter and splashing along the road—the same that, little more than a month ago, I had covered on foot, in such strangely different circumstances. My companion talked a great deal; and, sorely as it went against the grain, I had to listen, make comments and feign interest. For my bad temper did not make me lose sight of the importance of remaining in his good graces. I intended that he should bring me back to Rodez as a free man.

But it is inconceivable what fritter the worthy magnate contrived to pour forth, during those two hours, the while he deemed he was establishing his social position in my eyes. Names that were already familiar to me dropped from his lips. If I could not meet him on the ground of the exquisite amiability of M. de Montauban, to whose charge I placed—unjustly, as I afterwards found—the hue and cry after Montbars and the consequent discomforts of my own arrest, I was quite ready

to agree mendaciously that Madame la Marquise de Carbon-Moissac had an inimitable charm, was *tout-à-fait* Versailles, and that her husband could never be taken for anything but a true representative of France's noblest.

As we neared the ascent leading towards the court of honour at Castel-Rozac, I had to be made to understand why there was not a more frequent intercourse between the prefecture and the castle. . . . M. de la Boulaye had so many reasons to advance that I fail to remember any one in particular.

He fell silent, as the coachman, on reaching the court of honour, whipped up and "took his curve" to the door with unimpeachable smartness. He moistened his lips, rearranged his curls. It was evident that he was a little nervous. My own confidence rose.

Indeed, from the moment when Louradour's cry rang out through the wet airs, I knew that the matter was already settled beyond the possibility of doubt. As the worthy fellow flung back the great doors, and caught sight of my face, which was the nearest the carriage window, he first stared in blank astonishment; then, clapping his hands, cried out:

"*Seigneur Dieu*—Mr. de Quercy!"

I turned and flung a smile at the prefect. He had heard, and he was in a greater flutter—but more, I believe, at the thought that he might lose the social profit of his visit than from any remorse for his unfounded suspicion.

"I never doubted you, sir," he said, in answer to my look. "Pray bear in mind that I never doubted you. I will myself explain to M. le Comte de Ruffeleu the necessity which made me take this course, against my own convictions."

"Mr. de Quercy," repeated Louradour, running down the steps. "Back again! Has anything fresh happened?"

He looked anxiously at the escort, then at me; then at M. de la Boulaye.

"My good Louradour," said I, "this gentleman is

M. le Préfet, who desires an interview with the Comte de Ruffeleu. I have told him your master is ill. But in heaven's name," I cried, interrupting myself testily—the rain was pouring down the back of my neck as I thrust my head out of the window—"let us get into the house!"

I sprang out; and with ironical elaborateness, invited M. le Gouverneur to enter Castel-Rozac.

"There is a fire in the library," faltered Louradour. Then the instinct of his vocation arose superior to shaken nerves, and he resumed with pomposity:

"If M. le Préfet and Mr. de Quercy will do me the favour to follow me," he said; and leading the way, threw open the door.

Roubilliac was sitting by the hearth dozing, I think. At sight of him the old servant exclaimed in tones of satisfaction:

"Ah, M. le docteur, how happy I am to see you still here! We have visitors—you would never guess! Will the gentlemen give themselves the trouble to enter?"

"Ah, bah!—what is this?"

Roubilliac bounced from his armchair, wheeled round, and surveyed me with no less surprise than had Louradour. "Ah, bah!" he repeated. "My young friend, is it possible? And M. le Préfet? M. le Préfet, your servant, sir!"

His rather quizzical salute was returned by my magisterial companion with marked reserve. There was, obviously, but little sympathy between the ultra-royalist official and the medical man of less solid opinions.

"And what, in the name of all that is extraordinary," cried the doctor, rubbing his great hands, "can have brought my English patient and the Préfet de l'Aveyron together—and both of them to Castel-Rozac?"

"Doctor," cried I, cutting in before M. de la Boulaye, who had drawn himself up, puffed out his lace ruffles and assumed generally his most august air, could deliver his statement, "you see me here as a prisoner!"

"Ah, bah!"

"The fact is," I went on hurriedly—for Roubilliac had frowned, and I was afraid lest some indiscreet reference to Langévol might lead to fresh trouble, "the fact is that M. le Préfet cannot be fully persuaded that I am really Charles de Quercy."

"Ah, bah!" exclaimed the doctor again. "And who, may one ask, does M. le Préfet take you for then?"

"For one M. Fabien Montbars," I said.

The tables were turned. I knew myself safe—and I felt justified in the impertinence of a lamb-like air of ingenuousness. Roubilliac broke into Homeric laughter. M. de la Boulaye grew pink.

"The description, issued from Paris," he began, in tones of mixed offence and self-exculpation, "of M. Fabien Montbars tallies—most unfortunately, I grant—so remarkably with the characteristics of this young gentleman——" Then he stopped, huffily.

Roubilliac's shrewd, kindly eyes were running me up and down.

"Why," he jeered, "both are of dark complexion, certainly: but a spaniel may be black, and so may be a panther, yet one would hardly take them for the same animal!"

I could see he was enchanted at the opportunity of teasing a political opponent.

"Ah!—you know this M. Montbars, then?"

The question came as swift as a fencing *riposte*; and I could see that my prefect, for all his rather futile appearance, might have proved a very sharp and disconcerting inquisitor for any one with whom he was not in sympathy.

"M. le Préfet," said the doctor, "I know that gentleman in so far that I have set eyes on him. What is more, it was in this very house. M. Montbars called here upon some trivial social excuse," went on Roubilliac slowly, looking down at the nail of his middle finger as if it demanded immediate attention. "He called here, on Sunday last. Exactly this day week. M. le Comte de Ruffeleu and his guests, there is no denying, did not

take very kindly to him. I do not think"—here he looked up, straight at la Boulaye, and I felt the irony underlying the remark, "I do not think M. Montbars will return to this place."

The prefect took a note-book from his breast pocket —more, I imagined, for the sake of effect than for any real business purpose—and jotted down the information.

"Last Sunday, did you say, M. Roubilliac?"

The door opened, and the gentle presence of the Abbé Morel insinuated itself into the room. Close on his heels entered Brisco, noble, formidable, and melancholy figure.

Had any further testimony been required to the familiarity of my relations with Castel-Rozac, it might have been found here. The hound, all the strong lines of his fierce body suddenly softening in a kind of tender collapse, drew towards me, reared himself with his great paws on my shoulders, and gave one lick towards my face. Thereafter, having received my answering caress, he retired by the hearth—taking no notice of the other visitor. But, whenever my sight fell upon the creature, I found its yellow orbs fixed on me. I could read the anguished question: "There you are, friend of my mistress—but where—where is she?"

"My dear M. de la Boulaye!" exclaimed the Abbé. "My excellent friend! This is unexpected pleasure. You have come, of course, to inquire for M. le Comte. . . . You will be gratified to hear that there is improvement."

"You are not on the spot one bit, M. l'Abbé," interposed the doctor loudly. He was still rubbing his hands and chuckling. "Not one bit! M. le Préfet is here with a political prisoner. You have not greeted the poor captive. Brisco has been kinder than you, M. l'Abbé!"

"Oh—a prisoner——" the prefect protested.

"A prisoner!" cried I laughing. "Guarded by two gendarmes, nothing less!"

"Mr. de Quercy, a prisoner?" exclaimed the mild ecclesiastic, with a shocked and doubting glance at me.

"No, M. l'Abbé," said I, still bantering, "not Charles

de Quercy, but Fabien Montbars—who is, it seems, provided with as many disguises as Mercury himself!"

M. de la Boulaye made a wry face. He did not appreciate my humour—which, truth to say, was at that moment anything but genial. He addressed himself to the perplexed Abbé: and I must confess his words were well-chosen and delivered with some dignity.

"I do not think," he said, "that Mr. de Quercy has any cause of complaint for the manner in which he has been treated by me. Mr. de Quercy was arrested and brought before me as a person wandering in disguise and only able to give what he will himself own to be a most unlikely account of his suspicious circumstances."

"Doctor," said I solemnly, "it is that stable-smelling cloak of your providing that has undone me!" Seeing, however, a question hover on his lips, and anxious to forestall any explanation about the humiliating episode of the abstracted passports, I made haste to say: "But what is the good of further discussion? I have no doubt that M. de la Boulaye, to whom, indeed, I owe the kindest hospitality in the world, will not hesitate to believe the united testimony of Church and layman.—Perhaps, M. l'Abbé, you will kindly reaffirm your unconscious testimony, that, to your knowledge, I am, not M. Montbars, but a harmless English gentleman and the friend of M. de Ruffeleu."

"That is certainly the fact," said the Abbé, smiling apologetically at his friend.

"I am truly gratified, sir," said M. de la Boulaye, bowing towards me.

He looked at the doctor, then back at me; cleared his throat and turned again to the priest, as if there only he could be sure of sympathy.

"I should like," said he, "if it were possible, to present my respects to M. le Comte de Ruffeleu, and personally explain my reasons for thus having intruded upon him."

"That," said Roubilliac, forestalling the Abbé in a tone of flat determination, "is utterly impossible. M. de Ruffeleu receives no visitors with my sanction."

"I regret," said the polite prefect. "I regret extremely. Nevertheless I trust I may be permitted to present my homage to another member of the family. Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu-Fézensac, I understand, resides with the Comte."

There was a dead silence; which misunderstanding, the poor little toady said, modestly:

"If she could leave her relative's bedside for a few moments, I should esteem it as a favour, a very great favour, to be permitted to make my personal explanations to her."

"Unfortunately, sir," began the Abbé, hesitatingly, "Mademoiselle Adrienne has left——"

Here it was that I realized yet again what an alert man, on an emergency, the doctor was. He gave a hard look at the speaker, which effectually silenced him; and another at me:

"Mademoiselle de Ruffeleu-Fézensac," he put in, "having been assured by me that the Comte, her cousin, was in no immediate danger, has been obliged to tear herself away from his pillow, to go and attend the death-bed of her great-aunt, in Paris. Her great-aunt," said Roubilliac at random, "the Duchesse de Choiseul." The prefect bowed to the name almost as deeply as he might to the august lady herself. The Abbé coughed into his hand and murmured, in a very small voice, that Mademoiselle Adrienne was certainly devoted to her great-aunt—who was, he added with more alacrity, *une bien bonne dame*.

I was in a fever to be gone again.

"M. le Préfet," said I, turning to him, "I do not know whether I can trespass still further on your kindness by requesting you to bring me back to Rodez. I am here, luggageless; the weather is despairing, and even were it fine, my walking mania is a thing of the past! I am anxious to proceed to Paris."

Roubilliac, noting the prefect's disappointed countenance, intervened jovially:

"Louradour must provide you with some refreshment first—and then if you take my advice you will

proceed to Millac for fresh horses. At Millac, by the way, you will find news—— " Here he gave me a side-long look—"news of the most cheering character for one of your well-known zeal. The great Vidocq, who was set to run down your supposed double, Mr. de Quercy, has consoled himself by making a curious haul—quite a side affair, but really more important for the King's government than the laying by the heels of M. Montbars—a curious haul, I say, in the shape of a gang of coiners. The Giscourts, think of it! The family of the Wolf-Master of Rouergue! You will be shocked to hear of such turpitude, M. le Préfet. Every rascal of them left alive—for there appears to have been some lively fighting—has been netted. A satisfaction, it must be owned."

At this moment Louradour burst in upon us. His countenance was discomposed, and he gave every sign of agitation.

"M. le docteur—come quickly to M. le Comte! He has heard the sound of horses. I have done all I could to pacify him. But he insists that some one—some one, you know whom I mean—has arrived. He demands to see him. He insists. Come quick, M. le docteur, or he will be out of bed, and no one will be able to hold him back!"

"Stay here, l'Abbé, I will send for you if necessary!" cried Roubilliac, and was out of the room at a plunge, followed by the old servant.

We three sat down by the hearth, staring helplessly at each other. Nothing can describe my impatience for departure. The place overwhelmed me with sadness and resentment. I felt, besides, the incongruity, the indecency almost, of the presence of strangers at such a time in the house. I actually regretted not having resigned myself to the escorted journey to Paris—so little do we understand that the trivial goings and comings of each of us are like threads in a tissue, crossing and recrossing other lives; each a part of a great design.

What was, for me, a mere inconclusive episode was,

under the hand of God destined to round a noble life in peace, in happy serenity.

After a long silence the prefect looked at his watch; then the Abbé murmured encouragingly that the midday meal would probably be served before long. M. de la Boulaye waved a deprecating hand.

"I would not think," he asserted, "of such an indiscretion! I permit myself to remain on only until I am reassured about the condition of our venerated friend."

He then, with a gleam of curiosity in his eye, drew his chair near the ecclesiastic; and in an undertone began to question him upon the fortunes of Castel-Rozac.

"Should the excellent Count pass away—who succeeds? Has nothing been heard of the missing heir?"

But, before the Abbé, who had shrunk back from the question, with a frightened air, could find words of reply, Roubilliac reappeared. He came straight to me and laid his hand upon my shoulder. He was altogether unlike his usual self: his voice was grave, so was his countenance.

"Mr. de Quercy, I have to ask you to accompany me upstairs. The Comte is wandering. It often happens in these cases.—What do you say, M. l'Abbé?—By no means. I particularly desire that you should not show yourself just now.—Mr. de Quercy, the Comte will not be satisfied until he has seen, with his own eyes, that it is you who has come to his house, and not——" he hesitated, "and not that other one, so long expected!"

CHAPTER XXIII

EUTHANASIA

ROUBILLIAC ascended the stairs before me in silence. But when we had reached the landing, he beckoned me to his side with a peremptory finger.

"The mental condition of the Comte," he said, in a low voice, "has altered considerably for the worse. Subject to delusions. Delusions, young man, you know what that means: senility, if you must have another word for it. He has had two bad shocks. Now, I don't know what is going to happen when you and I go in there." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the Comte's room. "And, upon my word, I cannot tell whether he remembers that he embraced you as his son, and that when his own son came to him, he struck him across the face."

Roubilliac paused a moment. Though his tone seemed brutal enough, his eyes were full of ruth as he fixed me.

"There was nothing for it," he went on, "but to bring you to him, anyhow—unless we spent our time in holding the poor old gentleman in bed to prevent him from getting up and coming to look for you himself. For you—or rather for the one he expects." The doctor gave a short laugh, that had a very sorry sound. "Do you know," he resumed, "what his delirium is? That a villain named Montbars is keeping his son away from him! Upon my word, I find myself sometimes regretting, after all, that I did happen to be on the spot when that second stroke came! If I had not been so ready with my lancet—well, *allons!*"

Shrugging his shoulders, he stumped on. I followed, with the most cowardly shrinking. He opened the door; I had not thought it possible that his voice could ever assume accents so gentle.

"Here I am, M. le Comte. And here is Mr. de Quercy come to see you. Ah, how shrewdly you guessed it was a friend who had arrived!"

Again he beckoned to me. I stepped into the half-lighted room.

It was a great chamber of truly mediæval severity and grandeur. Tapestries covered its stone walls. An immense carved four-post bed, curtained in green and violet, stood in the middle of it. I can still see the scene, with the eye of memory, but at that moment I was conscious of nothing but of the figure on that bed. Propped up with pillows the old Comte lay, his hair silver-grey against the white of the linen; his face so pale that he would have seemed more like some ivory effigy than a living man but for the intense vitality of the eyes. These sought me; fixed themselves upon me. And in the silence that had fallen about us there came a sound—a sobbing cry of rapture that pierced me to the heart.

The Comte de Ruffeleu reared himself in the bed and flung out his arms:

"My son!—my son!"

I believe I would have turned and fled; but Roubilliac caught me with a hand of iron and drew me forward.

"Humour him!" he whispered, so close to my ear that his fierce breath was like a blow.

I fell on my knees by the bed: I knew not what else to do. The old arms clasped me, the old lips were pressed to my forehead, again and again, between broken blessings. Hot tears fell upon my face.

"Enguerrand! My little one! Ah, God be praised, my fine, brave son! Enguerrand, child of my name, my son! The Lord has had mercy on me, after all! My heir, my son!"

I was terrified lest he should die in my arms of his

ecstasy. And yet, so piteous was this misplaced rapture, that I had it in my heart to wish he might pass. Response I could make none ; but none was necessary. At length he released me, and fell back exhausted, but with a long, happy sigh.

After a glance at the poor old face, which still quivered with smiles, I looked up at the doctor and saw that he was openly weeping. And I could hear Louradour's stifled sob behind the curtain at the foot of the bed.

Roubilliac bent over and took his patient's wrist between his fingers.

"Leave me alone," said the old man, in a feeble voice. "I have this day a better medicine than even you, my friend, could devise. Ah, my old friend," he went on, and there was something wholly child-like in his air of innocent triumph, "you all wanted to deceive me, from the beginning. But I knew! You must admit I knew. Does a father not know? Ah, how good God is!"

He put out his hand ; and even without the warning of Roubilliac's savage glance, I would have taken it—taken it, as I did, and kissed it.

I saw, and it needed no doctor to tell me so, that, indeed, there was nothing for it but to deceive the dying man to the end. From the very first moment I entered the room I was sure, in some strange but certain fashion, that very few days of that tormented existence were left to run. Well, there was nothing in my power that I would not do to ensure their being passed in serenity.

There was little need for acting. If tenderness, respectful pity, devotion, make up a son's heart for an old father, then mine was truly a son's heart for the Comte de Ruffeleu. I remained kneeling by the bed, holding the frail hand ; and the sick man continued to talk, through his dream of happiness.

It seems a strange thing that the sight of another's perfect joy should have been so heartrending. When we come to look at life in its true perspective, do we not find that all our hours of bliss are really as much

dependent on a chimæra, as were those of the Comte de Ruffeleu on that November day? Are not our earthly joys as much creatures of imagination as was this phantom of fatherhood fulfilled? . . . We are such stuff as dreams are made of. . . . Feeding on Dead Sea fruit, grasping bubbles, straining wraiths to our hearts, we pass at last into our rounding sleep. I had but one desire—and it was passionately shared by Roubilliac—that the illusion might endure until the end.

Yet the doctor began, presently, to look uneasy as the wanderings became more extravagant and excited. The old seigneur fancied himself in the midst of company. He hailed friends long dead, as well as some of those neighbours I knew. But my presence was ever the centre of his thought, or rather that imaginary presence for which I stood.

"Ah, M. de Rohan, well met!—Enguerrand, this is your great-uncle, the Maréchal. Salute him, my son.—Yes, *cher prince*, my son has returned to me. A true Ruffeleu, is he not? A fine young man, my faith! Look at him. The image of my father. God is very good to me! God has indeed been very good to the House of Ruffeleu. After severe trials the Lord has had mercy. But, I have ever held the faith, been true to my God as a Ruffeleu should—and I have not been abandoned in my old age.—Look at him, M. le Duc. It is my son! As you say, my dear Carbon-Moissac, good blood—*bon sang ne peut mentir!* The perfect *gentilhomme!*—Ah, but I have long been surrounded with enemies!"

He bent forward and, finger on lip, whispered:

"Do not mention it to any one, M. l'Abbé, but I know now it was she who sent that fellow, that horrible young man, Montbars, to try and kill my son. Her revenge! Ah, but I saw what he was——"

The doctor intervened, bending over and speaking very distinctly, in short simple sentences as if to a child:

"M. Enguerrand is very hungry. He has come a long way. Had not Louradour better take him down and give him breakfast?"

"Oh—yes, yes!" The old man withdrew from my clasp, to lift both hands in a gesture of eager concern. "Yes, yes, of course. You are a hundred times right. The poor child must be hungry. He has come a long way. A long way. I should have thought of it. Tell Louradour to give him of the best—the Volnay. Go, Enguerrand, restore yourself. Go, my son!"

"I will come back at once," said I, rising.

As I turned to leave, he made a feeble clutch at my sleeve, and looked up at me with pleading eyes and a smile of exquisite tenderness. I knew what he wanted of me. And, Englishman as I was, I bent and kissed him.

I heard him break again into prayers and blessings as, stumbling, for my eyes were dim, I left the room.

"Send the Abbé up here, M. le Vicomte," cried the doctor after me. "Tell him how happy he will find your father. So old a friend—you understand?—will want to share in the family joy."

"Decidedly," thought I, "Roubilliac, rough country doctor that he is, has genius—the genius of the heart!"

I found the Abbé and the prefect together in the dining-room, over an omelette; entertaining each other, apparently to perfect mutual satisfaction. The priest, at my request, went quickly out with me, his kind meek face suddenly crumbled with anxiety. He grasped the situation with a quickness truly French, and entered into the pious deception with equal readiness.

"Ah, how sad it is that it should not be true," murmured he at last, wrung his hands and wiped his eyes. "I will go to him at once. Providence has allowed this to console him."

He gave me a kind backward look as he began to mount the stairs.

"What a pity," he repeated, wistfully, "what a pity it is not true!"

When I re-entered the dining-room, the prefect was

standing, with a constrained air, by his chair. The little man, who had been so condescendingly authoritative in the midst of his hospitality at the *préfecture*, was now almost paralysed by his sense of the dignity of the place in which he now found himself.

I had to reassure him, to press him back into his seat—I helped him to wine. I had very little stomach for food or for conversation ; but I could have laughed at this absurd reversal—at the deference with which my whilom gaoler received my attentions. Had I been in reality the honoured heir of Castel-Rozac he could not have contemplated me with a more melting gaze, inquired after the health of the excellent Count with a more anxious sympathy. Nor could I, it must be said, have responded with a more affectionate concern :

"I fear, alas! he is very ill," said I. And then I added, as, shaking his head, the prefect disposed of the last bit of partridge on his plate : "He wants to keep me here. He insists on it. I cannot leave him."

The statement was abrupt; but I need not have feared opposition. M. de la Boulaye bowed deeply in acquiescence, and moved his elegant hands. I could see I was rising by leaps and bounds in his estimation. . . . A young man of such recognized distinction and of such proper feelings!

The final seal was set upon my importance when Louradour returned to the room with the special bottle and respectfully pressed me to partake—averring that M. le Comte's wishes ought to be obeyed, all ill as he was. M. le Comte would be sure to ask—and it was little any one could do now to pleasure Monseigneur—Monseigneur who was, for sure, not very long for this world! Here the good fellow gave a sob and wiped his eye with the back of his hand. M. le Comte, who had set his heart, so to speak, on Mr. de Quercy, and that, from the very first!

I interrupted him, angrily, for the thought of the dying man's hallucinations being made country-side gossip was intolerable.

"That is enough, Louradour," I said, looking hard

at him. "And it is M. le Préfet's glass you must fill first."

He looked back at me—in so wounded a fashion, that I knew he had understood—and said humbly:

"I only permitted myself to make the remark because I felt that Mr. de Quercy must keep his strength up, since Monseigneur will depend so much upon him."

"You see," said I to M. de la Boulaye, "that contrary to my original intention, we must part company, sir. I must remain here."

He abounded in protestations of acquiescence and amiable regrets; volunteered, vowing that he would consider it a privilege to be allowed to do so, to see that all my belongings were duly forwarded. I drank a little wine and broke a crust. Then charging Louradour to continue his ministrations to the guest, bade farewell to one whose treatment of me, during our whole intercourse had been, after all, that of a conscientious official and a kindly gentleman.

I found the Comte sitting, propped higher in pillows; Roubilliac at the foot of the bed, the priest at the head. Both turned anxious eyes on me as I came in. There was a red spot of excitement on the sick man's cheek-bones. His eyes shone feverishly. Sundry parchments sealed and rubricked were spread upon the bed; a jewel case lay open between his hands. He acclaimed me, as I entered, in a high, feeble voice of exultation:

"There he comes!—Approach, my son, that I may pass round your neck, and see on you, the *Saint Esprit*, the highest honour the king can bestow on a noble of France. Ah, Monsieur mon Aumonier," turning his head towards the Abbé with a triumphant look, "will he not well represent—after me—all that is noble in Ruffeleu?—Repeat the device of our house, my son. Come, kneel by me, and let me hear from your lips the words that embody all the spirit of our race."

And I, poor heretic, alien guest of chance, knelt. Fortunately, I had gazed often enough at the faded,

gilt-lettered shield in my room to remember the lines:

Dieu veuille mon âme:
Ma vie est au Roy,
Mon cœur à ma dame . . .

I faltered when I came to the third—because I felt the old eyes fixed upon me with so strange an intensity. I fell silent a second. But, steadying my voice, I finished firmly:

Mes honneurs à moy!

There, at least, footing was secure.

He had, meanwhile, hung the cordon round my neck.

"No," said I, rising—I removed it and placed it gently back between his hands. "No, sir, your honours are your own, thank God, still."

He submitted with a gratified smile; and composure came back to him as with a consciousness of his own dignity.

"You are right, Enguerrand," he said, and began to replace the jewels in the case.

Roubilliac was quick to take advantage of the influence which he saw I could wield over his patient.

"Tell him," he whispered to me, as the wan trembling hands were extended towards the parchments, "that you will look at those some other day."

The old seigneur's exhaustion, after his febrile excitement no doubt aided our desire. He became as submissive as a child to any wish expressed by me, and would be content so long as I remained sitting beside him—holding his hand for the most time.

Singular hours were those! Two days only, but in the darkened room, the measures of existence were lost: morning passed into noon, noon into night, and night again dragged out to dawn. And I hardly knew how it was with me, and whether we had not together reached the border place between this world and the next where eternity destroys the meaning of Time.

My fellow watchers—those two kind men, diametrically opposed to each other almost at every point, the priest and the doctor—united in their devotion about the slow death-bed, did all they could to spare me. But it was found that restlessness invariably supervened as the result of my absence, and I hardly ever left the room.

I suppose there must have been a considerable strain of fatigue upon me, yet I look back upon that time as one—if I may use such an expression—of the most extraordinary other-worldly sweetness. To see the serenity, the wonderful irradiation of peaceful joy upon the countenance I had known so tormented and so sorrowful; and to know that, based upon a myth as it was, it had nevertheless been my gift, was like a perfume to my soul.

I remembered his agonized face in the chapel, when he had wrung his hands in prayer. I remembered the awful rage of his wolfish frown; and, contrasting these images with the beautiful tranquil countenance upon the pillow, etherealized and radiant, I thanked God for having sent me back to Castel-Rozac.

The Abbé said in a whisper to me, on the second night, as we both gazed down at the sleeping man:

"Let us regret nothing. The deception is not of our making. It is God Himself Who is soothing His poor old sick child. *Le Bon Dieu* can be very motherly," added the old priest, with perfect simplicity.

Of a truth—and none of us, out of our love for him, but saw it with gratitude—life was ebbing, very gently, but, unmistakably, from the worn-out frame.

"It is euthanasia indeed," said the doctor. "He will go in his sleep."

Yet, for once his professional acumen was at fault.

It was, I think, soon after the sunset hour of the third day that Louradour, creeping into the room, brought me a letter—it was addressed to his care, at Castel-Rozac. By the glimmer of the night-light I saw at once that it was from Adrienne. I slipped it into my breast-pocket. Even had I been able to read

it, I would not have done so by that bedside, where every thought must be of peace. But, with the strange perception of the dying, the Comte de Ruffeleu opened his eyes and looked at me deeply. I saw he wanted to speak to me, and bent close to listen; his voice had become the merest breath of sound.

"My son, she has written to you."

"Yes, father."

"Come nearer, Enguerrand. Answer me. Do you love her?"

I could say truly, out of my poor betrayed heart:

"Yes, father."

As I straightened myself, I saw the deep eyes still fixing me; and there was a question in them which demanded a reply. I knelt again, and took the cold hand in mine.

"Listen to me," I said. "Adrienne de Ruffeleu, I know it, loves your son. She loves Enguerrand de Ruffeleu. She has promised to marry him. She will be a noble and faithful wife. And he is very happy."

"Ah—so am I!" sighed the old Comte.

I caught the words more from his smile than from any sound of speech. Then he made an effort. His face kindled. I think he wanted to recite once more those lines that had meant so much to him all his life. But he never went further than the first:

Dieu veuille mon âme. . . .

EPILOGUE

MONTBARS and his wife had taken ship to England, from Bordeaux, as a letter from Adrienne to the doctor reported. As for hers to me, I still would not open it until after the funeral: I dreaded the breaking, the desecration of the wonderful peace.

There never was any possibility, of course, of the real Enguerrand's return for his father's obsequies; so that the odd trick of fate persisted to the last. And when the great stone of the family vault was slipped back into place again, covering the remains of Gontran, seventeenth Comte de Ruffeleu, I knelt mourning him with a son's grief.

It was such a ceremony as he would have loved. The Bishop of Rodez officiated, and all the great name-bearers of the province were marshalled after the coffin. The *préfet* was there in state. A Rohan—the Duke himself—held one corner of the pall; the Marquis de Carbon-Moissac another; a young Fézensac the third; and an old seigneur de Kerguelen, who had hied him from the depths of Brittany to do the last honours to his ill-used nephew-in-law, the fourth.

The Marquis and the rest of that special Rouergue group looked at me askance. And I could see a gleam in M. de Montauban's eye which heralded a desire to hold me up in my proper light before the company—a desire only kept in check by the solemnity of the occasion. But M. de la Boulaye was as much overjoyed as profound grief for the loss of his aristocratic neighbour would allow, to shake me by the hand again. And, on hearing of my approaching departure, volunteered his services to facilitate my journey to Paris.

I think the Abbé must have confided something about me to the Bishop ; for the latter, after the funeral meats, desired that I should be presented to him, and gave me a few kind words in which I could detect not only benevolence but something actually of gratitude. After that, M. de Montauban might shrug his shoulders as much as he would : had I chosen to remain among the assembled guests, I should have found the episcopal blandness mirrored on most faces. But I was only anxious to get into solitude as soon as conventions would permit.

As the mourners rose from table, I slipped away. Passing through the library, I came upon the doctor, who had taken his leave of the uncongenial company even before me. He was bending over an outspread newspaper. He looked up on my approach.

"Ah, Mr. de Quercy, here is something that will interest you. Come and read."

I drew near, and looked over his shoulder. It was the *Drapeau Blanc*, that ultra-royalist gazette which my poor late host received regularly, as did every "well-thinking" subject of the Restoration—and as regularly left unopened.

The article to which Roubilliac pointed was headed in broad type, "THE LANGÉVOL BAND," ran in the vituperative style typical of the partisan French journalism of the time, and opened thus :

"The details of the capture of a band of coiners at Langévol, near Millac, in the Rouergue, have at last come to hand. The first discovery of their nefarious practices was, it would appear, accidental ; but the subsequent unravelling of the whole affair, and especially the netting in of all associates but one—the baron Giscourt himself—reflect the greatest credit on the police agents and the local *gendarmerie*.

"The *policier*—Vidocq, who was charged with the duty of capturing that vile conspirator Fabien Montbars (a scoundrel of the most dangerous

type, known to have engineered the evasion of the *canaille* Lavalette) had traced him as far as Millac. But there it was found the bird had taken alarm, and had disappeared. Certain circumstances, however, gave Vidocq reason to suspect that this Montbars might be in hiding at Langévol——"

After a dramatic description of the dangerous character and the evil reputation of the caves, the writer went on to describe the discovery of the coining installation, and the rounding in of the rest of the Giscourts. These, it appeared, had been actually found all together in one of the deeper galleries engaged in secretly burying five dead men of their own gang—every one of whom bore the marks of a violent end.

I looked up, when I came to this point, and Roubilliac, in answer to my mute question, remarked drily:

"Yes—it is lucky for you that it should be a capital crime to infringe on the royal prerogative of minting." Then he went on, cynically, "Not a bad thing, either, that they should have violently resisted arrest, as it seems they did"—he tapped the paper. "They killed a gendarme: it will be the guillotine for some, and the galleys for the rest. A clean sweep this time, and a good job too! There, take the rag, peruse it at your leisure." He gave a grim laugh. "It will amuse you to see that there is some perturbation over the disappearance of the Wolf-master himself—'that Baron,' as the *Drapeau Blanc* has it, 'of the Corsican's making.' But reassure yourself, M. Vidocq is quite confident of being able to bring him to justice before long.—Ah, the good Brisco!"

He gave me a friendly nod, and went on his way.

I mounted to my room. There I sat for a long time, as on many an evening before, staring into the fire. . . . I had the sealed letter in my hand; and, even then could scarce make up my mind to open it. It was like going out of harbour into the storm; like waking from the

sleep of forgetfulness to a morning of trouble. Yet it had to be done.

Bracing myself, I stirred the logs into flame; and in the shifting rosy light, read at last Adrienne's farewell lines to me. They began, formally enough:

> "DEAR MR. DE QUERCY,—I do not quite know where to write to you, but I trust this will reach you—some time.
>
> "I owe you an explanation, and I owe you an apology—and yet, no! I will make neither. You will understand, and that will be enough.
>
> "You have been put to some inconvenience, perhaps—indeed, most probably—a mere temporary inconvenience! But the life of my Enguerrand has been saved by you, for the third time! Your passport has fitted to perfection and has facilitated all. Without it we never could have got away. I am bad at expressing myself, but you may believe that I am grateful. Would I write at all if I were not?
>
> "To-morrow we are to be married. After that I don't know—I don't care. We change our plans a hundred times a day: but nothing matters so long as we are free, so long as we are together. And both these things we owe to you, dear Mr. de Quercy. That cannot be forgotten—ever!"

She signed herself as before with the outline of a wolf's head. And then—ah, it was Louvecelle all over! —there was a postscript, dashed off in one of those generous moments which make her adorable in my memory in spite of all.

> "I know you would have given me the papers, if I had asked you. Forgive that I did not—my faithful friend!"

I read it once, and again; and then thrust the

sheet into the fire. I saw it flame and quiver, and fly away at last in unsubstantial white flakes up the chimney.

That was the end of my romance. Castel-Rozac was an empty shell. Storm and passion, and sorrow, and death had passed through it. And there was nothing left in it for me. I went away next day. The doctor and the Abbé came to speed me, with kindly warmth. Yet I knew that my departure was a relief to them.

Brisco received my farewell pat with melancholy indifference. The only person who was wholly sorry to see me go was Louradour. He wept bitterly; but tears were very ready with him since his master's death.

"You will come back, sir! You will come back!" cried the poor fellow as he wrung my hand.

"Of course I will," said I. "Some day." And all the while I vowed to myself that I never would.

I have kept that secret pledge. Yet it is not for want of many appeals. Enguerrand de Ruffeleu, his wife and family returned to Castel-Rozac—it is now some thirty years ago, after the Revolution of July—and then many cordial invitations began to reach me from across the water. A curious correspondence had become established between myself and Adrienne, almost from the first: as she had promised, she did not forget.

In my quiet country home, in my lonely studious hours, I would receive from time to time—about twice a year—letters dated from the strangest corners of the world. Vivid messages they always were, telling me a great deal, in their own abrupt, laconic way. Perhaps that marriage would not have been so oddly, so deeply joyous had it not been for the wild, roving existence they had chosen and its appeal to both their natures.

But even a Louvecelle will be tamed by maternity. When the children came, the heart of Adrienne began to turn to home and France. I understand that the

legal vindication of Montbars' claim to the heirship of Ruffeleu was an epic in itself—but it was at last fully, finally established. And as the old Comte's testament, made in days when his complete sanity could not be doubted, had secured his succession to Adrienne in the event of his son failing, the family fortune had never been a moment in danger.

It was after a longer pause than usual that the first of Adrienne's letters dated from Castel-Rozac itself reached me. Full of kind words, it breathed a more gentle spirit than the missives sent from her exile.

> "Come, dear friend," she wrote, "and see us in our home, and look upon the content which but for you never could have been ours. Enguerrand is very happy to be here. He grows more like his father, I think. His mother is dead—did you know it? Louradour is as white as snow: were it only to see his joy with our children, it would be worth your while to come."

But I could not bring myself to accept. I had settled down to a placid life, and could not face the idea of going back to those scenes of my past folly. . . . Perhaps the wound I thought so fully healed was but hidden away. . . . For I believe now that, at the bottom of my wisdom, there was a deep reluctance to gaze upon that content with which Adrienne tried to lure me.

I am glad of my decision, unworthy as may have been the feeling that prompted it. Glad, too, that in a very short time afterwards our correspondence waned and finally lapsed. . . . I have thus no image of the Comtesse de Ruffeleu in matronly dignity, in maternal pride, to overlap that of Louvecelle, wild, dew-fresh, sunset-coloured—my Diana of the Hills . . . my only love.

I am glad even not to know whether she is alive. Or, if not, when and how death overtook her. . . . I can form no thought to myself of age in connection with

her, of sickness or distress. . . . Loup-Cervier, too—Loup-Cervier remains to me ever gallant, ever dashing, ever laughing! . . . *Ay de mi!* as he would have said, his son is now older, by many years, than any of us were when we parted company!

But as the wood-smoke from the hearth floats up to my nostrils and evokes those pictures of the past with which such a dreamy, lonely old man as I am colours his long, musing hours by the fire, there is no shadow of decay upon them; no hint of the long-falling tragedy of years. . . . Linked with that other radiant youth, my own youth keeps its glamorous adventure, its one romance unchallenged.

THE END